

NFL Rehab work in Indy; JaMarcus in the hurry-up

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Money man

K-Rod closes in on the record—
for saves
and salary

PLUS
Trading
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Angels reliever
Francisco Rodriguez

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Brett's back in town, and he's ready for a fight.



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TO KNOW LIST

5 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1

THE MAIN EVENT

Greetings from Mannywood!

Manny Ramirez goes Hollywood. Awesome, dude. When you think about it, Man-Ram should be an ideal fit for L.A. because he is an entertainment special all by himself.

You want action? Watch him bat.

You want a hero? Watch him bat in a clutch situation.

You want comedy? Watch him play left field.

You want suspense? Watch him to see if he'll pull himself out of the lineup or half-heart it to first or attack a team official because his ticket request hasn't been handled to his liking.

You want drama? Watch him 24/7. Hitting in a new league, finding his way in a new clubhouse and dealing with a new market could mean a new story line daily from now to October. Or, if the Dodgers are fortunate, now through October. Think of the possibilities:

Manny meets Joe Torre. Terry Francona handled—OK, tolerated—Manny for four-plus seasons, so Torre should be able to manage him for two months. Right? They got through the hair thing, but what happens when Manny decides he wants a day off before consulting his manager? At least Torre has plenty of options—the Dodgers have four other outfielders who can start. Well, four if you include Andruw Jones and his .161 batting average.



During his first week in L.A., Ramirez cast some long shadows.

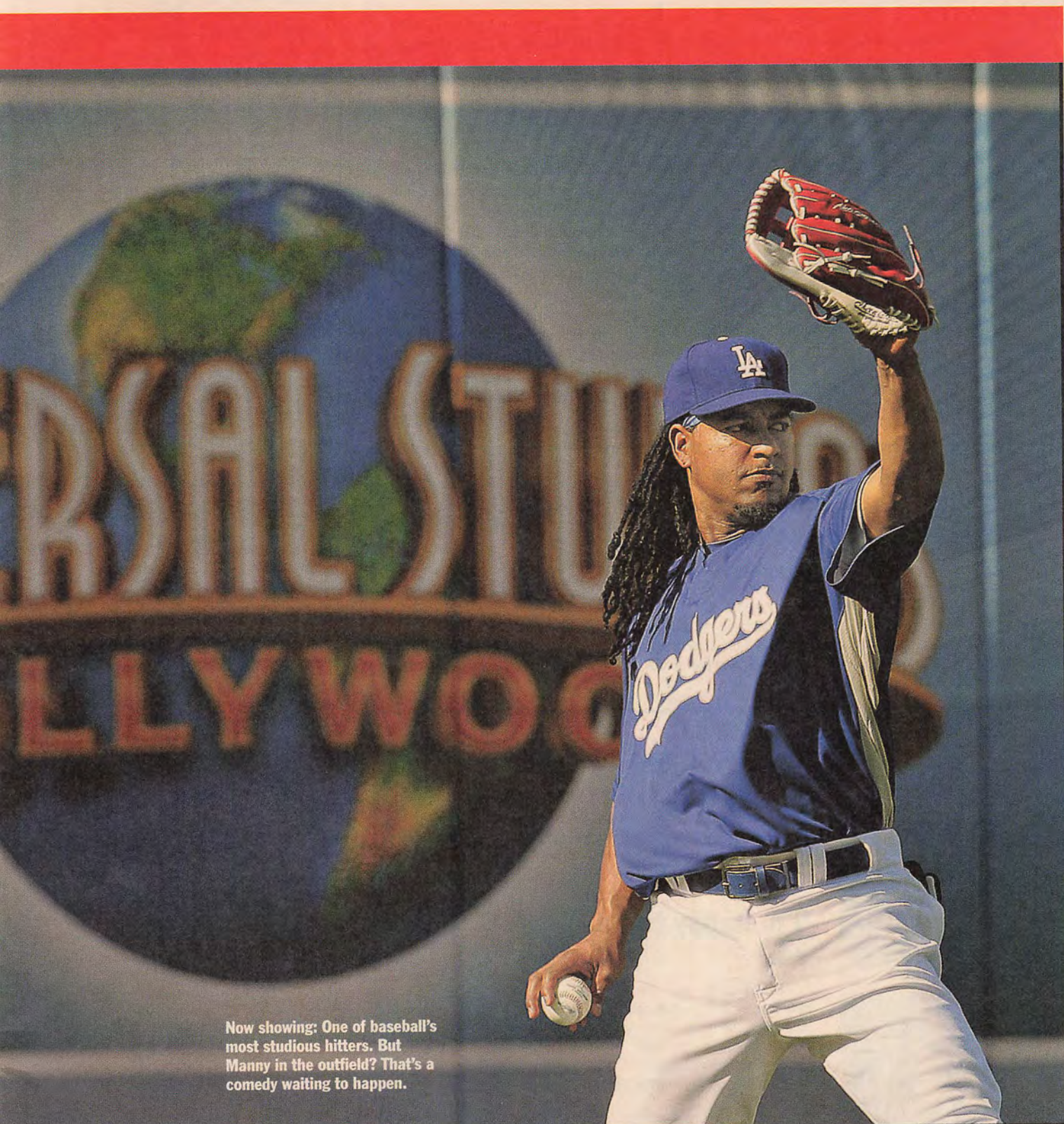
Manny meets the N.L. West. For all of his wacky ways, Ramirez is first and foremost a serious student of hitting. Like all hitters, the more he faces a pitcher, the more comfortable he becomes. Now he'll be facing a bunch of N.L. pitchers he hasn't seen much: He has zero at-bats against Arizona's Brandon Webb and San Francisco's Tim Lincecum, is 1-for-2 against San Diego's Jake Peavy and 1-for-3 and 0-for-5, respectively, against Colorado's Jeff Francis and Aaron Cook. He should get to know these guys in a hurry because the Dodgers have three series remaining against the Padres and Giants and two against the Diamondbacks and Rockies.

Manny meets Jeff Kent. The laid-back Ramirez might want to stay out of the path of Kent, a cantankerous sort who has been known to get in the face of a teammate. Kent tangled with Barry Bonds, so you know he won't shy from Manny.

Manny meets the media. In Southern California, Manny already has stolen the headlines. Two days after the crosstown Angels made a blockbuster deal for Mark Teixeira, the Dodgers traded for Manny. Just that quickly, baseball's best team had been upstaged.

Welcome to Hollywood, where the Manny show goes on. And on.

—Stan McNeal



Now showing: One of baseball's most studious hitters. But Manny in the outfield? That's a comedy waiting to happen.

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TV/DVD

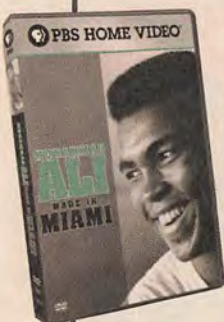
Ali before he was Ali

Ask sports fans which athlete floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee, and they'll give you the answer immediately: Muhammad Ali. His boxing accomplishments gave him the platform to become one of the most influential Americans in history and an icon worldwide.

But where did he learn all those floating and stinging techniques? In South Florida, under the watchful eye of iconic trainer Angelo Dundee at the 5th Street Gym on Miami Beach.

The PBS documentary *Muhammad Ali: Made in Miami* focuses on the stretch of the legendary boxer's life—when he still was Cassius Clay—during which he learned and perfected his craft. *Made in Miami* tells the story of Ali's life in and out of the ring, from his friendship with Malcolm X to his stunning upset of Sonny Liston in 1964.

The show will air Monday on PBS (check local listings), and an enhanced DVD will go on sale for \$19.99 the following day. —Ryan Fagan



3

REMEMBER THE NAME

LeGarrette Blount

He's a bulldozer and a half—and he rode slowly from his hometown of Perry, Fla., to East Mississippi Community College and on (and on and on) to Eugene, Ore., to play for the mighty Ducks. Why? For the uniforms, of course.

This fall, the 230-pound Blount, who was the highest-rated junior college running back on many boards last season, just might run roughshod over the Pac-10. At the least, he will be the ideal complement to expected starter Jeremiah Johnson, a scatback if ever there were one.

"He's reminiscent of Reuben Droughns, a real power runner," Oregon coach Mike Bellotti says of Blount. Truth be told, Bellotti has even higher hopes than that. "He makes you go, 'Wow.'"

—Steve Greenberg

4

GET IT BEFORE IT'S HOT

For the fashionable bandwagon jumper

Now that the Cubs have entered (gulp) August with a five-game lead in the N.L. Central, it's time to face the Billy Goat. This T-shirt (centurypeat.com) draws its scoff-at-the-curse inspiration from reliever Ryan Dempster, who in addition to predicting a World Series victory this spring has said, "Enough of the curse this, the curse that, the goat this, the black cat, the 100 years, whatever it is. We're a better team than we were last year."



5

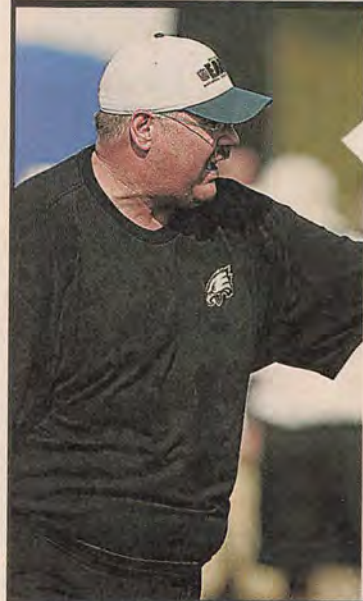
YOU HEARD IT HERE

'Well, they're old.'

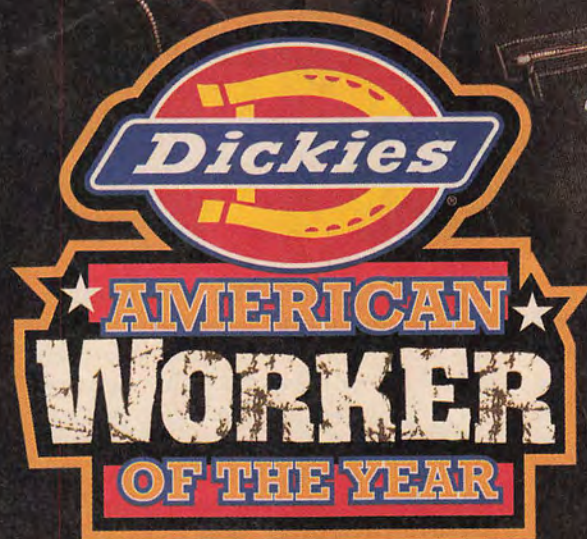
—Eagles coach **Andy Reid**, to *Sporting News*' Clifton Brown, on why during Philly's two-a-days, any player over age 30 gets to skip the morning practice every third day (ostensibly to keep them fresh)

'I'm happy to be 34.'

—Eagles safety **Brian Dawkins**, to Brown, on being a fortunate member of the thirtysomething club, along with quarterback Donovan McNabb (31) and offensive tackles Jon Runyan (34) and Tra Thomas (33)



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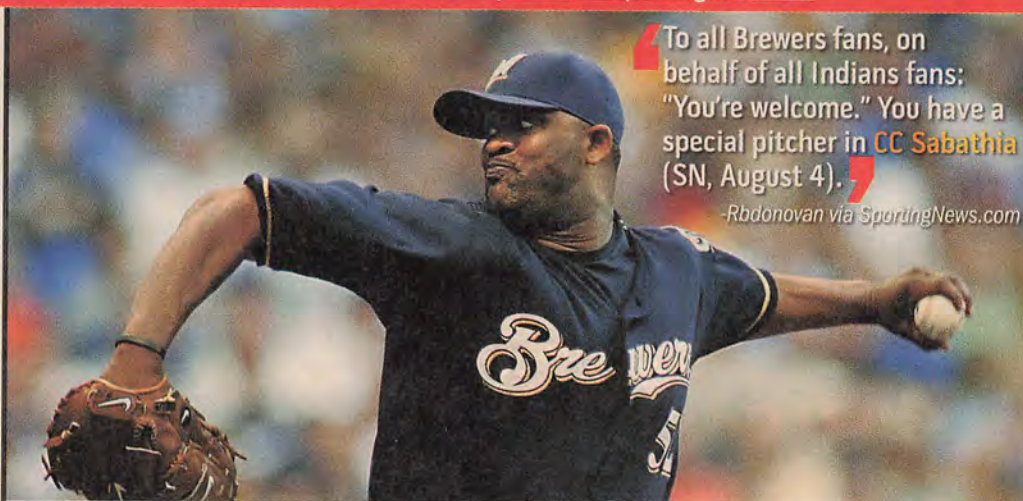


YOUR TURN

BLOG ON

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To all Brewers fans, on behalf of all Indians fans: "You're welcome." You have a special pitcher in CC Sabathia (SN, August 4).

—Rbdonovan via SportingNews.com

■ I find it interesting how the Favrebackers feel the need to shoot down Aaron Rodgers (SN, July 28) every chance they get. Funny, I'm guessing if Favre had never decided to come back, you guys would be acting like Rodgers would be a great starter. —Jcbadger via SportingNews.com

■ I'd like to see Rocco Baldelli (SN, August 4) come up and contribute. It would really stink if the Rays finally became good and Rocco couldn't be a part of it. —tvr34448 via SportingNews.com

■ G.M. Billy Beane's A's (SN, August 4) were only a few games out of the wild-card race when they traded pitcher Rich Harden to the Cubs. What kind of message does that send fans? When the A's save all this money, do they give season-ticket holders a rebate? —GoldRaker via SportingNews.com

■ Great story by Dennis Dillon on Willie McGinest (SN, July 28), one of the classiest players in all of sports. Sure would be nice to see him retire as a champion. (Hey, nobody picked the Giants either last year!) —Browns_4_life via SportingNews.com

■ I'm impressed with UConn's Hasheem Thabeet (SN, August 4) from what I've seen and heard. And regarding North Carolina's march to the 2009 title—weren't they supposed to win this year, too? Nothing in college is guaranteed. Good luck to Thabeet and UConn. —528808 via SportingNews.com

■ Devin Hester's agent (SN, August 4) must have dug up an old clip of Bobby Wade returning punts, just to refresh the Bears' memory. And that was enough to get Hester signed. —Beev-a-roo via SportingNews.com

RE: DEADLINE DEALING

Posted by ps3265

Remember what the Braves gave up to acquire Mark Teixeira last summer? They sent catcher Jarrod Saltalamacchia, minor league pitchers Neftali Perez, Matt Harrison and Beau Jones, as well as infielder Elvis Andrus, to Texas for Teixeira and lefthanded reliever Ron Mahay, who bolted in the offseason. Salty is struggling but he is young, only 23; Andrus was featured at the Futures Game this year. He's one of the Rangers' top prospects. So is Perez. Harrison was promoted to the majors this month and got his first win this past weekend. Jones could be a dominant reliever. So, over the past year, the Braves have managed to stock the Rangers' farm system and make the Angels the favorites to win the World Series. In return, they got Casey Kotchman and Steve Marek. Yikes!

RE: IN YANKEE TERRITORY

Posted by morrisseyweb

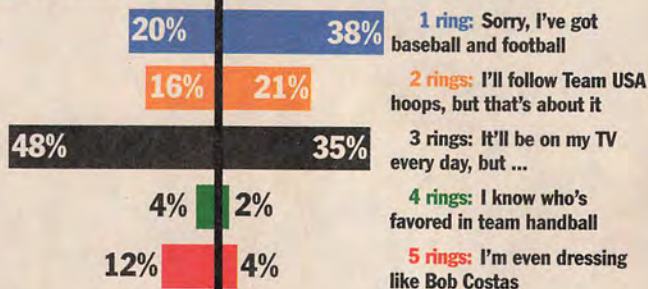
For my daughter's 13th birthday this week, we took her to New York. Part of the plan was to go to Yankee Stadium. ... We didn't get into the game but we took in the sights of Yankee Stadium. We saw the new stadium going up—my goodness it's beautiful. We wore our Red Sox gear around and not one person hassled us. Perhaps that's because we weren't hassling anyone else? Keep that in mind, Sox fans—act like an (expletive), be treated like one.

POLLING PLACE

On a scale of 1 to 5 rings, how interested are you in the Beijing Olympics?

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RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on [Sporting News Radio](http://SportingNewsRadio)

'Not only did the Angels get the best bat on the trade market, but they continue to pound the Red Sox. I'd bet on the Angels right now to win the World Series.' —Steve in Orange County, Calif., on [The Postgame](http://ThePostgame.com) with Peter Brown

For the Maddening crowd

EA Sports is planning a little get-together to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its football franchise

The annual release date for EA Sports' Madden franchise is a holiday for a nation of sports video gamers. And what's a national holiday without a party?

EA Sports will host Maddenpa-looza on Tuesday at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif. The event will coincide with the 20th anniversary release of Madden NFL 09, and gamers will be treated to live music, 300 Xbox 360 kiosks featuring the game and a chance to be one of the first to purchase the new release at an on-site Wal-Mart popup store.

Good Charlotte, Busta Rhymes, Rev Theory, Airbourne, From First to Last and Young Dre The Truth—all musical acts featured, yes, on the Madden NFL 09 soundtrack—will perform throughout the day.



For better or worse, the reality of EA's simulations is this: It's weird to see Favre in a different uniform.

Madden NFL 09, which features Brett Favre on the cover, is being touted as "the first sports game that adapts to you," thanks to an IQ system that continuously assesses gamers' skill level. The game will also feature numerous changes, including a revamped play-calling screen, new touchdown celebrations and a rewind feature that essentially gives players a do-over after a mistake. In all, EA Sports is touting more than 85 new features. —Chris Littmann



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Sporting News Radio's Matt Spiegel will make his way to the Rose Bowl to cover Maddenpa-looza for FirstCuts, SportingNews.com's new sports culture blog. For full coverage of the event—and all things Madden—visit firstcuts.com.



Fantasy football

You'll find Brett Favre on Madden NFL 09's cover but on the NFL Greats roster in the game itself. With Favre's future up in the air, the good folks at EA Sports did what any self-respecting gamer would: In franchise mode, they transferred Favre to the free-agent roster pool so any of the 32 NFL teams could claim him. (If only it had been that easy, eh, Ted Thompson?) Then things got interesting. EA simulated the 2008 season with Favre on four different teams. —Bob Hille

	With Favre		Without Favre	
Bucs	12-4	Lost in divisional round	11-5	Lost NFC championship
Jets	11-4-1	Lost in wild-card round	9-7	Missed playoffs
Vikings	10-6	Lost in wild-card round	5-11	Missed playoffs
Packers	9-7	Lost in divisional round	12-4	Lost in divisional round

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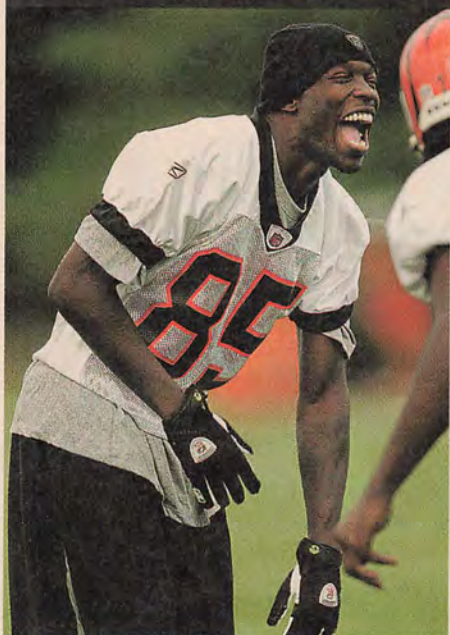
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ON DECK

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The week ahead in sports

PICK of the WEEK



MON 11 Hey, Chad, this preseason stuff is serious business.

Bengals at Packers (8 p.m., ESPN). Sure, it's just an exhibition, but imagine the hype level for this *Monday Night Football* game, a contest that has both Cincinnati's Chad Johnson and the drama that has become the quarterback position in Green Bay. It's everything ESPN could have ever wished for and (shudder) more.

SAT 9 Red Sox at White Sox (7 p.m., WGN) is part of a huge weekend in the Windy City, what with baseball's pair of Sox contending and doing battle on the South Side and the Cardinals-Cubs rivalry festering up north. The real question is, how will J.D. Drew and Ozzie Guillen handle the pressure?

SUN 10 The first post-Tiger major had the ol' shark himself, Greg Norman, in contention right up till the back nine on Sunday of the British Open. What will the final round of the **PGA Championship** at historic Oakland Hills, near Detroit, have in store? Watch the build-up on TNT (coverage starts at 11 a.m.) and the stretch run on CBS (starting at 2 p.m.) Hurry back, Tiger.

■ **Cardinals at Cubs** (8 p.m., ESPN). In a perfect world, there would be a channel we could watch with a split screen, one side always trained on Tony La Russa and the other always following Lou Piniella. And a "Death Glare" counter right up top. If only ...

WED 13 Hard Knocks '08: Training camp with the Dallas Cowboys. (10 p.m., HBO). There has never been a more perfect team for HBO to document, what with Tony and Terrell and Jerry and friends. This is only episode No. 2, and already we can't wait for next Wednesday.

THU 14 Panthers at Eagles (8 p.m., FOX). Really, doctor, it's not possible to watch too much football at this point of the year, is it?

—Ryan Fagan

BOB HILLE'S
STARTING

5

1 The Olympics. It's hard not to notice the smog. Frankly, to be this polluted 1) you're not even trying to curb CO₂ emissions or 2) you're a Bengal in the offseason.

2 College football. It's official: The countdown to kickoff has begun. The players are in two-a-days and my 55-year-old neighbor is practicing keg stands.

3 The A.L. East. Talk about ruthless, negative and, yeah, a little underhanded. In fact, when the Pudge deal went down, I expected to hear, "I'm Brian Cashman, and I approved this trade."

4 Penn State. There was confusion when some players were dismissed from the football team because 81-year-old Joe Paterno did it by yelling, "Hey, you kids, get off my lawn!"

5 August. Honestly, I'm already looking forward to fall. I'm constantly watering, and about all that's staying alive is crabgrass and the Brett Favre story.

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Givin' 'em the business, NBA-style

In this summer school, players are learning to run (a company), pass (on bad investments) and shoot (for entrepreneurial spirit)

Maceo Baston sits in the front row with his wife. Across the aisle is Austin Croshere, and just behind him are Quentin Richardson, who arrived early with his laptop, and Antonio Davis. Desmond Mason, in a crisp aqua polo shirt and armed with a rainbow of highlighters, sits up straight, paying close attention. Zaza Pachulia, Adrian Griffin, Jeff Foster—it seems as if a pickup game could break out at any moment.

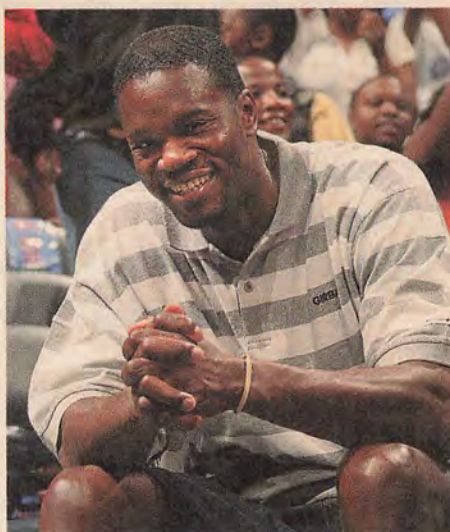
But this gathering is more about the MBA than the NBA. The eight players are gathered to hear about defending brands (and not Elton) as part of the National Basketball Players Association's high-growth entrepreneurship program—four days of intense business classes and workshops at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, one of the nation's best business schools.

At the head of the class, professor Daniel Diermeier is lecturing about the basics of image protection and crisis management, citing among his examples Nike's connections to child labor overseas and criticism of the effect Starbucks Coffee's bean-buying practices had on rainforests. Mason's hand shoots up.

"But with companies like Starbucks and Nike, people still go there. There may be kids in sweatshops, but people still pay \$100 for Nikes," Mason says.

"That's because they were able to react and manage the perception of the brand," Diermeier says.

This is the fundamental idea behind the program—to get NBA players thinking about



Davis, a former union president, wants NBA players to know when to say no.

business issues and how they affect them now and in the future. But the thrust is making players better, smarter entrepreneurs.

"We get hit up with all these so-called great ideas," says Davis, a recently retired 13-year NBA veteran and former president of the players association. "We're basketball players. We don't always know how we should be handling those situations."

Davis has certainly seen NBA players get into financial trouble—and not always because of far-out plans brought by a stranger.

That's why, three years ago, when Davis met Steve Rogers, a professor of finance and man-

agement at Kellogg, he was drawn to the notion of establishing an offseason business education program for NBA players.

"Every single athlete is approached with get-rich ideas all the time," Rogers says. "But they don't have the tools to evaluate those ideas. Their focus is basketball. They should be saying no to these deals almost every time. ... That's where this program is aimed to help."

This isn't exactly a flip-flops and straw-hat summer school. Classes start at 8:30 a.m. There is a three-hour workout window in the middle of the day, but classes go until 9 or 10 p.m. When classes are done, there are case studies to review. Players are not required to attend—no doubt, more ought to—but the ones who are willing to give so much time are going to be serious.

Mason is a good example. He'll turn 31 this year and make \$5.3 million in the coming season, the last of his contract with the Bucks. He'll probably play a few more years, but he already is thinking about retirement, investing and starting a business or businesses. "Now I have a better idea that, if someone approaches me, they better have a business plan, they better be willing to have their own money invested as part of the business, too," he says. "I know what red flags I need to be looking for now."

On hearing Mason's quote, Davis smiles. It might not exactly be the kind of joy Davis would've gotten from knocking down a 15-foot jumper to win a game, but it just might be more important. —Sean Deveney

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COUNTDOWN TO BEIJING

Athleticism or experience?

It's an age-old question, and for Team USA the answer is **Jason Kidd** ... even if he bristles at the words *age* and *old* By Mike DeCourcy

If his current teammates were better students of Olympic history, one of their jokes about Jason Kidd's advancing years might have a little more bite. "We told him he was on the '06 Olympics team," says United States national team forward Carmelo Anthony. "1906."

Alas, there was no 2006 Olympics team, which everyone remembers clearly.

And there were no Olympic Games in 1906, either.

And still, it's funny when you hear this from Anthony. Unless you're Jason Kidd. "He doesn't really like it," Anthony says.

Point guard Deron Williams calls Kidd "Pops" or "Old Man." Even coach Mike Krzyzewski, who is in his 60s, likes having a little fun with the subject. "They're kidding. I don't think anyone's more respected out of this group. Because they all respect excellence, especially over a longer period of time. And he has the longest period of time.

"Did I say that politically well?"

Kidd is 35, which doesn't seem particularly old given that swimmer Dara Torres is going to the Olympics at age 41 and Libby Callahan, 56, will be shooting pistols at the Games. For a fellow shooting basketball, though, Kidd is up there. He alone adds six months to the average age of the U.S. basketball team.

And yet his experience is one of the myriad reasons Kidd will start for the Americans in Beijing. Krzyzewski says the lineup was established months ago and that Kidd will be the point guard serving up passes to Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony and Dwight Howard.

Since that edict was issued, there has been no shortage of criticism of Kidd's presence in the starting five, as well as on the roster. In one online poll, 60 percent



of respondents preferred either Chris Paul or Williams as the Americans' starting point guard. A common refrain is that the ascent of Paul and Williams last season, coinciding with the decline by Kidd after he was traded to Dallas, indicate it's time for someone fresh handling the ball.

The irony of this is after years of complaints from fans that the United States treats its Olympic team too much like an all-star competition, its coaches are being criticized for treating it like a team. The coaches judge Kidd to be the player who'll bring a sense of order, direction and leadership to the starting group. They like that he's 6-4, strong and tough—harder for some of the bigger international guards to muscle around. They like that he has never lost in senior international competition—he's 38-0, including going 10-0 last summer at the FIBA Americas Championship event that qualified Team USA for Beijing—and that he is the one player who has experienced winning an Olympic gold medal, in Sydney in 2000.

"I'd liked to have coached him, if I was a pro coach, for his whole career. And I really love coaching him now," Krzyzewski says. "The fact is we need physicality at the guard spot, and experience.

"He has the respect of his teammates and his opponents. Jason Kidd is one of a kind. At this time in his career, to be with many of the elite players in the league, I would think it's rejuvenating."

Kidd clearly was enjoying himself at the team's training camp in Las Vegas. He was spied playing a little black-jack during the evening. He joked that his teammates had ulterior motives for continually referring to him with such great respect during interviews. "They just want the ball," he says. "They're going to get the ball, so they don't have to say my name."

His obvious delight represented an immense improvement from the frustration that enveloped the final few months of his most recent NBA season, when there was so much pressure on him to improve the Mavericks following a February trade from the Nets. He didn't deliver. His scoring, rebounds and assists all declined, and the Mavs were only slightly better than a .500 team with him in the lineup.

"There was a lack of emotion ... just the whole trade thing and



China (Yao) and Australia (Bogut) hold down the middle with two of the NBA's best young centers.

The NBA country club

No fewer than seven of the 12 men's basketball teams at the Beijing Games have players who are on NBA rosters. Only one, though, has a player who is playing for an NCAA team: Australia, with Patrick Mills of Saint Mary's College of California. —Benson Taylor

Argentina

Manu Ginobili	Spurs
Andres Nocioni	Bulls
Fabrizio Oberto	Spurs
Luis Scola	Rockets

Australia

Andrew Bogut	Bucks
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China

Yao Ming	Rockets
Yi Jianlian	Nets

Germany

Chris Kaman	Clippers
Dirk Nowitzki	Mavericks

Lithuania

Linas Kleiza	Nuggets
Darius Songaila	Wizards

Russia

Andrei Kirilenko	Jazz
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Spain

Jose Calderon	Raptors
Rudy Fernandez	Trail Blazers
Marc Gasol	Grizzlies
Pau Gasol	Lakers

Source: NBA

really never getting comfortable," Kidd says. "The West was hard ... being three games out of first place and in the sixth or seventh spot. We just lost a lot of close games. Hopefully we can learn from that and be better next year."

Kidd says he may shoot more frequently in the Olympics because opponents will dare him to try. His statistics suggest he's better at it than his reputation. He took only 10 shots in last summer's 10-game qualifying tournament, but he was 5-of-8 from the international 3-point line. That's hardly a representative sampling, but he hit 119 of 312 (38.1 percent) from the longer NBA distance even in a

relatively disappointing season. Opponents that drop back into the lane and leave him in the clear could pay dearly for that decision.

"Everybody knows I like to pass the ball, so I'm going to be open, and I'm going to have to take the shots because that's just going to make our team better," Kidd says.

"As long as I can get up and down and help these guys with just sharing my experience—I thought that I could play at a high level now, even though I'm 35, that I could give something to the team. Knowing this could be my last time, I'm going to try to enjoy it." **SN**



The Beijing Games: Five things for five rings

Freelance writer Jay Weiner is in Beijing covering the Olympics for SportingNews.com. His five story lines to follow while you're waiting for Team USA's games to tip off:

Eight will be enough. U.S. swimming monster **Michael Phelps** wants to splash toward eight gold medals. We'll know if he can break Mark Spitz's record of seven by Monday. The U.S. men's 4 x 100 freestyle relay team Phelps is a part of will be tested on that day.

How's the hammy? The best U.S. hope in the glamorous men's 100-meter dash is former Arkansas Razorback **Tyson Gay**. But he pulled a hamstring at the Olympic trials last month and his readiness is in question. Keep an eye on Jamaica's aptly named Usain Bolt.

Triple threat. It's an oddball sport with a neat story, taekwondo—the Korean martial art. Americans Steven, Mark and Diana Lopez are going for gold, marking the first time three U.S. siblings have been on the same Summer Olympic team since 1904.

Athletes' Republic of China. When you've got 1.3 billion fans, the home-field advantage is kind of ridiculous. Experts are predicting 88 medals for China, more than any visiting country. Key guy: defending gold medalist **Liu Xiang** in the 110-meter hurdles.

Mature women: Swimmer Dara Torres is 41 and will win medals. There are 20 mothers on the U.S. Olympic team. No wonder Johnson & Johnson is an Olympic corporate sponsor.

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Closing costs

Francisco Rodriguez is chasing the single-season saves record and answering questions about his durability—but can the Angels afford to keep him? *By Stan McNeal*

Francisco Rodriguez knows how to shut the door.
On conventional thinking. Check.
On opposing hitters. Big check.
On the record book. Prepare to check.
On his own team. Get the check ready.
Let's start with conventional thinking. Rodriguez does not look the part. He is not 6-5 with hair on his back and eyes ablaze. He is listed at 6 feet and sports a bit of a paunch. His tightly curled dark hair and attire—jeans, long-sleeved designer T and black shoes—give him more the look of artiste than closer extraordinaire.



*Photos by
John Cordes*



On this Saturday in late July, Rodriguez is the last Angel to arrive in the visitors' clubhouse in Baltimore. Unlike the majority of his teammates, he does not show up three hours before batting practice for extra work. He strolls into the clubhouse less than an hour before it's time to take the field, heads to his corner locker and slips into an Angels practice jersey. He visits the pregame spread (fries smothered in ketchup), checks his e-mail and signs a couple of baseballs for Orioles closer George Sherrill that were brought over by a clubhouse attendant.

But don't think his late arrival is a sign of slacking. Because Rodriguez doesn't work until the ninth inning, he has the luxury of preparing during the game. After watching the other team's first turn through the order, he begins his routine. He retreats to the trainer's room to get a heat pack on his right arm and to have his ankles taped. He takes a turn on the cardio machines. He stretches his legs first, then his upper body. "By the eighth, I am done with my stuff. By the eighth, I am locked in," he says. When a save chance is looming, he starts throwing after the other team bats in the eighth.

Rodriguez follows his own routine in the offseason, too. He heads home to Caracas, Venezuela, and, unlike most established big leaguers, pitches in winter ball. The Angels, once opposed to his participation, have developed an understanding with Rodriguez and his team, the La Guaira Tiburones. "We have a 15- to 20-inning limit and tight restrictions on using him in back-to-back games. His club has become very good for us to work with," Angels general manager Tony Reagins says.

The Angels now understand why Rodriguez wants to pitch in the offseason. It keeps him in shape.

"I don't do the stuff that a regular pitcher does," he says. "I'm the kind of pitcher who does not lift weights. The only thing that keeps my arm in shape is playing winter ball. I only play in December to make sure when I come back in spring training I'm good to go. In the past I've had injuries when I don't do anything for four months."

He is not some testosterone-fueled heat thrower who instills that 'oh, no—here he comes' feeling in hitters.



Why the aversion to weightlifting? "One reason I was hurt so much was because my first couple of years (in the minors), they made me lift weights," he says.

Of course, conditioning is not the only reason Rodriguez likes pitching for his hometown crowd in winter ball. He is as beloved as any player. "As soon as they know he is coming in, the chants start: 'Kid! Kid! Kid!'" says Rodriguez's agent, Paul Kinzer.

Says Rodriguez: "I'm not going to lie to you. They have only 10,000 people, but they make noise like 300,000 people in the States. Trust me, it's loud and kind of rough out there. When you do good, they love you. When you do bad, oh my God."

Rodriguez does not think like a conventional closer, either. That is, he thinks more. He is not some testosterone-fueled heat thrower who instills that "oh, no—here *he* comes" feeling in hitters. When the kid they soon would call K-Rod blasted onto the scene as a 21-year-old rookie in 2003, he was able to rely on the unfamiliarity factor, a 95-mph fastball and a nasty slider. But, as Angels manager Mike Scioscia says, "He has evolved."

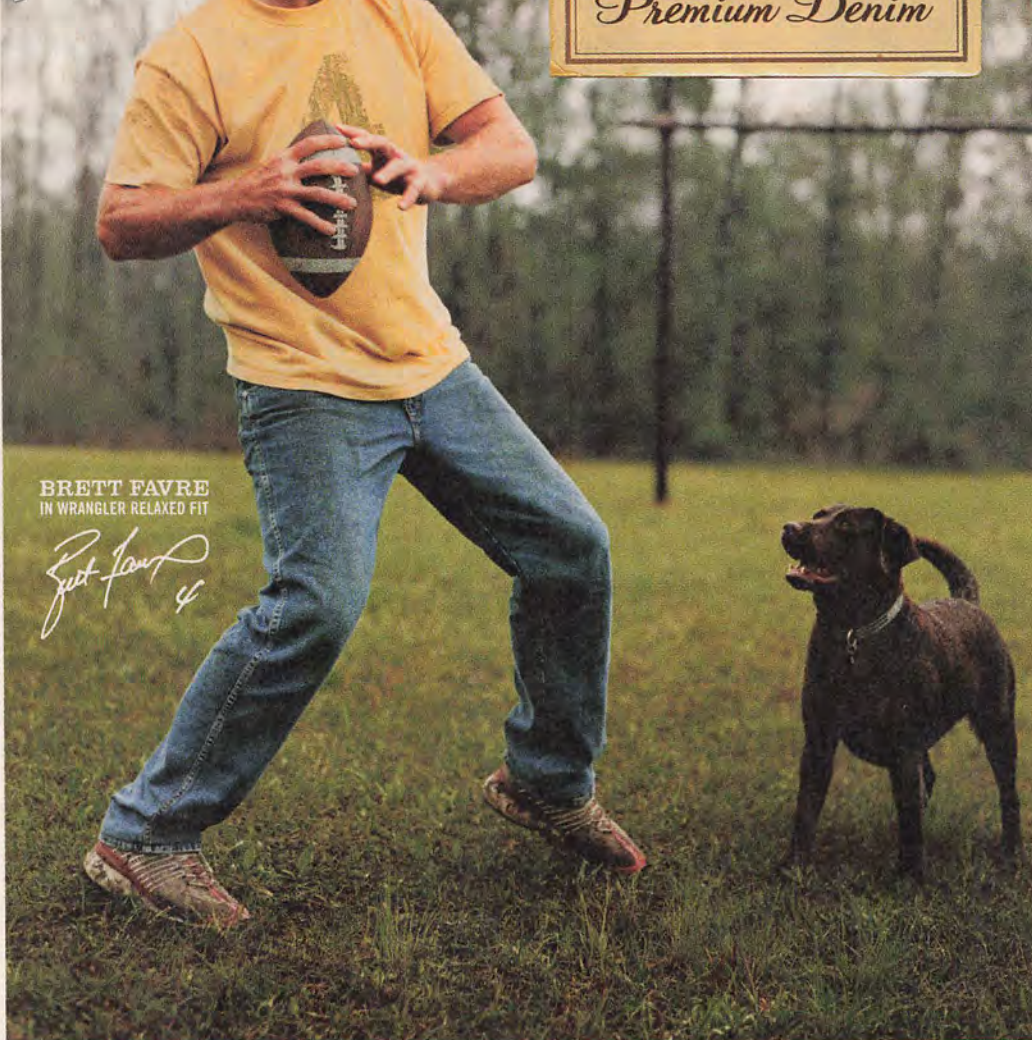
This season, Rodriguez has begun using his changeup as an out pitch in addition to a fastball that has been mostly in the 91- to 93-mph range and his plus curveball. "This kid may not have a power fastball, but he has a devastating breaking ball," Orioles first baseman Kevin Millar says. "It's one of those pitches that you can know it's coming at times and you still can't hit it."

Angels center fielder Torii Hunter, who until this season played behind another of the game's top closers, Joe Nathan, enjoys his view of Rodriguez. "Joe Nathan's nasty. A bulldog type. Frankie's more of a pitcher-type closer," Hunter says. "This dude is smart. He has a curve that he can throw for a strike and one that just breaks off the table. Now his changeup is making him even nastier. With his curveball, you know it's coming, but you still can't do anything with it. And now, you don't know when the changeup is coming."

When Rodriguez describes a recent outing, it's immediately apparent that he does a lot of thinking on the mound. Entering the game against the Orioles with a 2-run lead, he retired the first two hitters, mostly with fastballs. Then Millar stepped in and slugged a 93-mph first-pitch fastball into the left field seats. The next hitter followed with a double on another fastball, putting the tying run at second base. Two off-speed pitches later, a harmless grounder to first sealed the Angels' victory.

"To me, it looked like they were sitting on off-speed all the way," Rodriguez says. "Up by two, I can throw nothing but fastballs because I know a solo shot is not going to hurt me. But when you have people on base, everything changes. That's

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Rodriguez is happy that he has learned to get outs without having to hit 96 on the radar gun.

when I have to start making pitches and mixing it up.”

Rodriguez’s delivery certainly defies conventional thinking. As he blew through October 2002, winning five playoff games to help the Angels claim their first World Series title, scouts were already talking about how his motion would result in an injury. He throws across his body with a max-effort delivery and has an off-balance finish, all of which raise health concerns. Scouts now point to a drop in his fastball velocity as another reason for concern.

From 2003 to 2007, Rodriguez pitched in at

least 59 games a season and made only one trip to the disabled list. Still, he tweaked his windup before this season to relieve stress on his arm and ankles. He comes off the mound with such force and little balance that he has sprained both ankles while pitching.

“I made an adjustment so I’m not landing so hard,” Rodriguez says. “Besides taking pressure off my ankles, I feel like my command is a lot better. I used to keep my legs way high and throw with all my weight forward so when I landed, I didn’t have control of myself. I used to be on the ground all the time. Before, I was just out there throwing as hard as I could. Now I’m not doing that. Now I’m locat-

ing pitches.”

So although scouts talk about a drop in velocity from 94 to 96 to mostly 91 to 93, Rodriguez isn’t worried. “When I need to let it fly, I can do that,” he says. “But with what I’m doing now, I’m getting a lot of people out. Why change?”

Angels pitching coach Mike Butcher, who has been watching Rodriguez since his minor league days, shrugs when questioned about Rodriguez’s windup, as if he’s heard the concerns forever. Butcher says what looks off-balance from the stands makes picking up the ball tough on hitters. “When you look at him with the naked eye, there’s deception in his delivery,” Butcher says. “What may look stressful to the naked eye or to the scouts—everyone has their own opinion—is part of what makes him successful. That deception makes him what he is. It’s who he is.

“As far as flaws go, his foot is down, his arm is on time, there’s no arm drag, so he does a lot more things right than wrong.”

Rodriguez has appeared in nearly half of the Angels’ games this season, but no one—not Rodriguez, his agent or the club—says he is overworked. One reason is Scioscia decided before the season to limit Rodriguez to the ninth inning, a strategy to which he has adhered for the first four months. And Rodriguez hasn’t pitched more than three consecutive days this season.

“He has the ability to go four out of five games or five out of six,” Scioscia says, “but the way things have worked out, it’s been incredible on a day that when he was unavailable we didn’t have a save situation, or when he might have been pushing four in a row, which he could do, a (save) situation didn’t come up. He’s pitched a lot, but it’s been spread out and it’s kept him this available.”

The way 2008 is progressing, closing the door on the single-season saves record is becoming more probable than possible. When White Sox righthander Bobby Thigpen set the record in 1990, he began August with 32 saves. Rodriguez ended July with 44, which puts him on pace for 62 saves if he stays healthy and the Angels continue winning at the same clip.

Reaching a record, of course, requires a lot of variables coming together. Three, in particular, have for Rodriguez.

■ An offense that sputtered much of the first half was offset by pitching strong enough to put the Angels ahead in a number of low-scoring games. The Angels rank ninth in the A.L. in runs scored—a stat that should improve with the Mark Teixeira acquisition—and have a run differential of plus-51. Oakland, which is 15½ games behind the Angels, is plus-30.

■ The bullpen, 20th last season in ERA, has been bolstered by the arrival of rookie Jose Arredondo and a bounce-back season from Scot Shields. Arredondo, 24, has shown closer potential since coming up in mid-May and led the staff with

Overworked? Hardly

Francisco Rodriguez is making a mockery of the single-season saves record, but he is being amazingly economical in the process. Compare his innings-pitched totals to his saves totals over the past four seasons. At his current pace, K-Rod would reach 60 saves with fewer innings pitched (64) than he has tossed in any of his three previous seasons as the Angels' full-time closer. —Chris Bahr

Season	Saves	IP
2005	45	67⅓
2006	47	73
2007	40	67⅓
2008	45	48⅓

a 1.16 ERA after his first 27 appearances. With Shields back to dominating eighth innings, Scioscia's plan to limit Rodriguez to the ninth has resulted in some quick saves. He has saves in which he made just one, four, five and seven pitches. That's not to say he has had many cheapies, though; only 12 have come when he entered the game with a 3-run lead.

■ Rodriguez has been as good as he has had to be. Aside from his saves, he has been less than spectacular in other areas. His walks are up from last season, resulting in a pedestrian 1.22 WHIP. His strikeouts are down, from 12.0 per nine innings to 9.3. But his opponents' batting average is .181, and he has blown only three saves.

Rodriguez is no more concerned with his rise in walks than he is with the records. "They're not chasing the pitches in strikeout situations," Rodriguez says, referring to a curve that often bounces before crossing the plate.

If Rodriguez continues on this path—he leads the majors in saves since his first season as a full-time closer, 2005—he someday will be looking at



Rodriguez doesn't waste a lot of time going from the bullpen to this. He's averaging barely more than one inning pitched per save.

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Rodriguez likes playing with Vladimir Guerrero (right) and the rest of the Angels, but his offseason decision will be based on business.

the career record, too. He is nine saves shy of 200 and is only 26. At that age, all-time leader Trevor Hoffman had five saves, No. 2 Lee Smith had 47 and No. 3 Mariano Rivera had yet to record his first.

"Francisco has established himself as one of the best closers who's ever been in the game," Scioscia says. "When it's all said and done, he's going to be knocking on the Hall of Fame if he stays healthy."

Of course, all this talk about records could result in Rodriguez's shutting the door on the Angels. Rodriguez, who "lost" in arbitration last offseason (he wanted \$12.5 million but had to settle for \$10 million), has made it clear that he plans to test the market when he becomes a free agent after the season.

The Angels, who have offered him \$36 million over three years, will wait to see how the market unfolds because they do not "plan to bid against themselves," Reagins says. Like the rest of baseball, the Angels have seen pitchers—starters and relievers—who sign long-term deals fall short of expecta-

tations far more times than not.

When asked whether he would be surprised if Rodriguez left this winter, Reagins gives the standard, "Nothing in baseball surprises me." If he isn't resigned to losing Rodriguez, he at least has thought about the possibility.

"The offers we have put on the table didn't meet his expectations," Reagins says. "Like Frankie says, this is a business, and we have to think about the organization. We believe that to be competitive in the long term, you need a strong minor league system and good scouting. We're building for long-term success."

Kinzer has not talked in depth with Reagins since the season began but already is building a case for his client. Asked whether he believes Rodriguez will land the biggest contract ever for a reliever, the reply is quick. "Without a doubt," says Kinzer, who will be shooting for "five years, at least." "We thought he would need 40 to 45 saves to put him in great shape to go on the market. This is better than we could have ever hoped."

Also helping Rodriguez's bargaining power

were the signings last winter of Francisco Cordero (four years, \$46 million by the Reds) and Nathan (four years, \$47 million by the Twins). Rodriguez is younger and more proven than both.

The market, of course, will remain undetermined until the winter, but this much is certain: Rodriguez will not let sentiment enter into his decision. "To me, this is a business. I'm not a fan at all," he says. He was not happy to lose his arbitration case last winter, and he has talked about how the Angels have had six years to lock him into a long-term deal.

How much will that affect his odds of re-signing?

"I'm the kind of pitcher that whatever happened in the past, stays in the past," he says. "I try to live day by day. Whatever I did last year or the day before is in the past. They already paid me for that. They pay me for this year. The focus is this year."

Until sometime in October, when it'll be time to shut the door. Based on what has happened so far this season, no one does that better than Rodriguez.

SN

The market will remain undetermined until the winter, but this much is certain: Rodriguez will not let sentiment enter into his decision.

Who can afford to spend on saves?

Francisco Rodriguez's agent, Paul Kinzer, says it's a "slam dunk" that his client will sign the biggest contract ever for a reliever. But the options appear limited when it comes to clubs in position to hand him a long-term deal worth more than the five-year, \$47 million contract the Jays gave B.J. Ryan in 2005 (last offseason, Mariano Rivera signed the biggest per-season deal, \$45 million for three years).

So where will K-Rod end up? Conversations with two general managers, one manager, a scout and three closers produced this list of teams that need a closer and/or have the payroll flexibility to sign one, in order of the most likely to sign Rodriguez. —Stan McNeal



Current closer

Takashi Saito

2008 outlook

Saito is still three years from becoming a free agent, but his current elbow injury is a concern. Snatching K-Rod from their neighbors sure would be good P.R. for the Dodgers.



Fernando Rodney

Todd Jones, recently removed from the closer role and placed on the D.L. with a shoulder injury, won't be back. Rodney and Joel Zumaya aren't proven commodities and have had arm injuries. The Tigers have thrown around big money in recent seasons and aren't expected to stop spending.



Kerry Wood

Wood has been relatively effective and healthy—until the blister problem—in his first season as a closer, but he's on a one-year deal. If he or the team falls short of expectations, what better way for a new owner to make a splash than to go after Rodriguez?



Billy Wagner

He has one more year plus a club option, but he's 37, has had arm troubles and has struggled enough to make the Mets at least consider a run at Rodriguez.



Francisco Rodriguez

He quickly turned down their three-year, \$36 million offer. Don't look for them to go much longer than four years or higher than \$50 million, and that probably won't be enough.



Jason Isringhausen

Though Izzy's deal is up after this season, the Cardinals don't like throwing huge deals at pitchers. They have the resources, though.



Mike Gonzalez

The Braves have had little stability at the position since John Smoltz moved back to the rotation in 2005, but they don't spend like they used to and aren't likely to meet Rodriguez's asking price.



Brad Lidge

They're set.



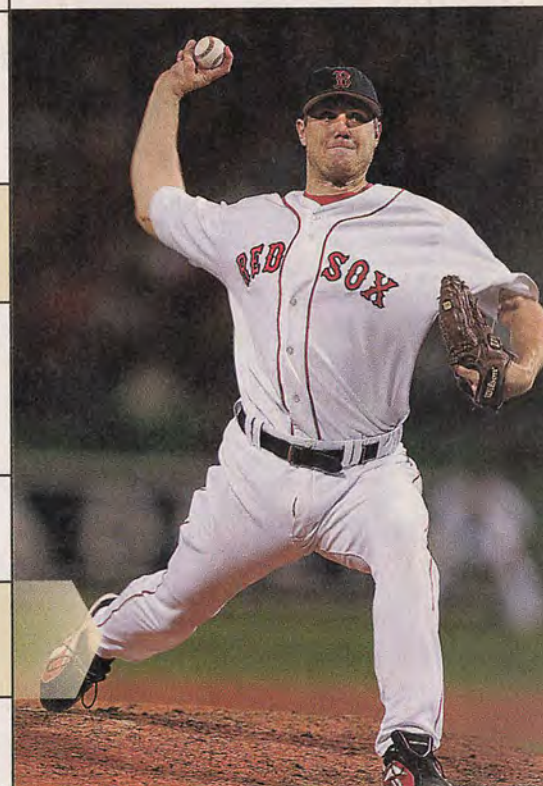
Jonathan Papelbon

See Phillies.



Mariano Rivera

There's no opening in the Bronx; Rivera has two more years on his deal.



NFL

Hurry-up drill

This year, the Raiders need their former No. 1 overall pick to be ready from Day 1. JaMarcus Russell has the tools, but does he have the touch? *By Phil Barber*

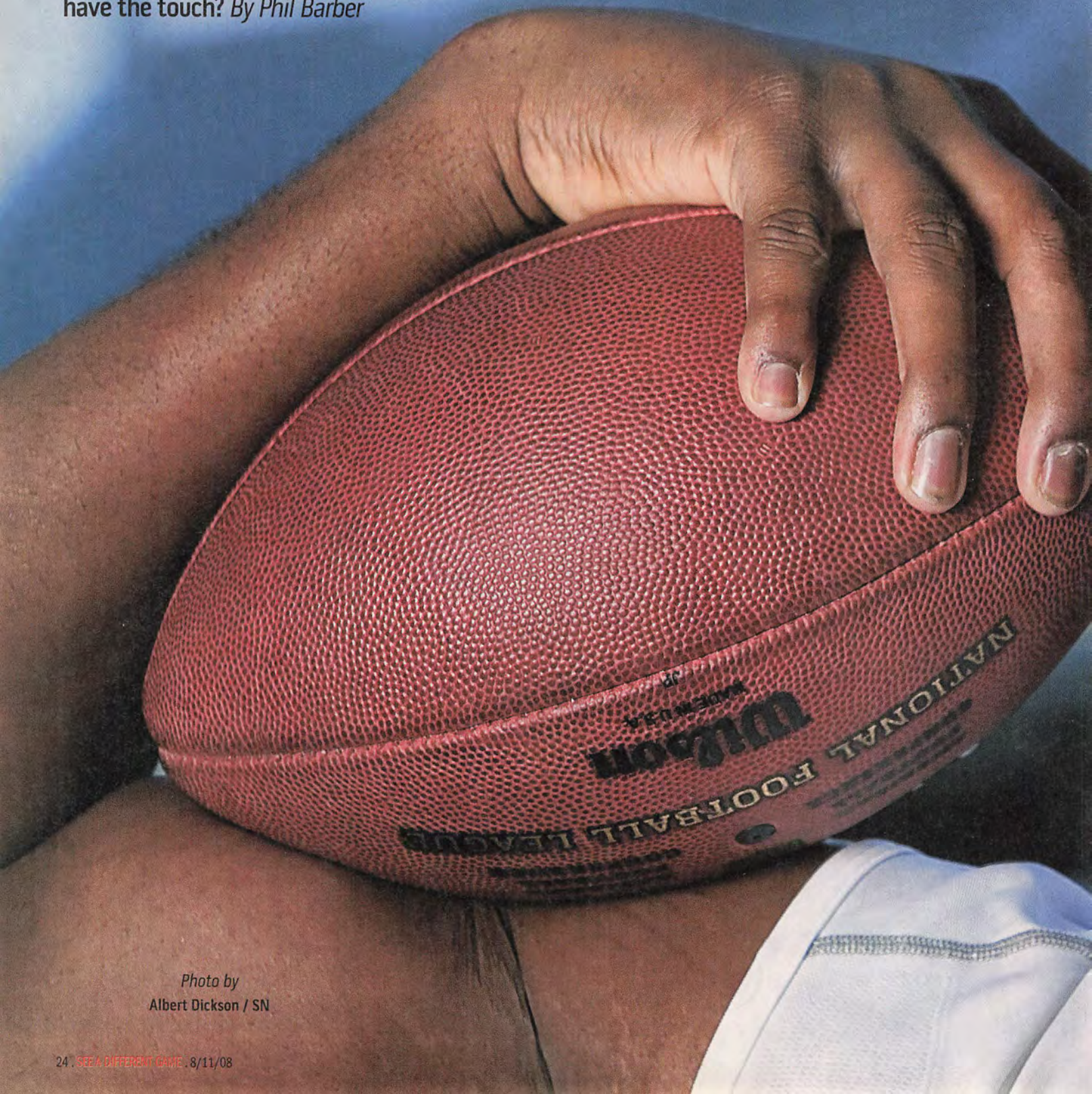
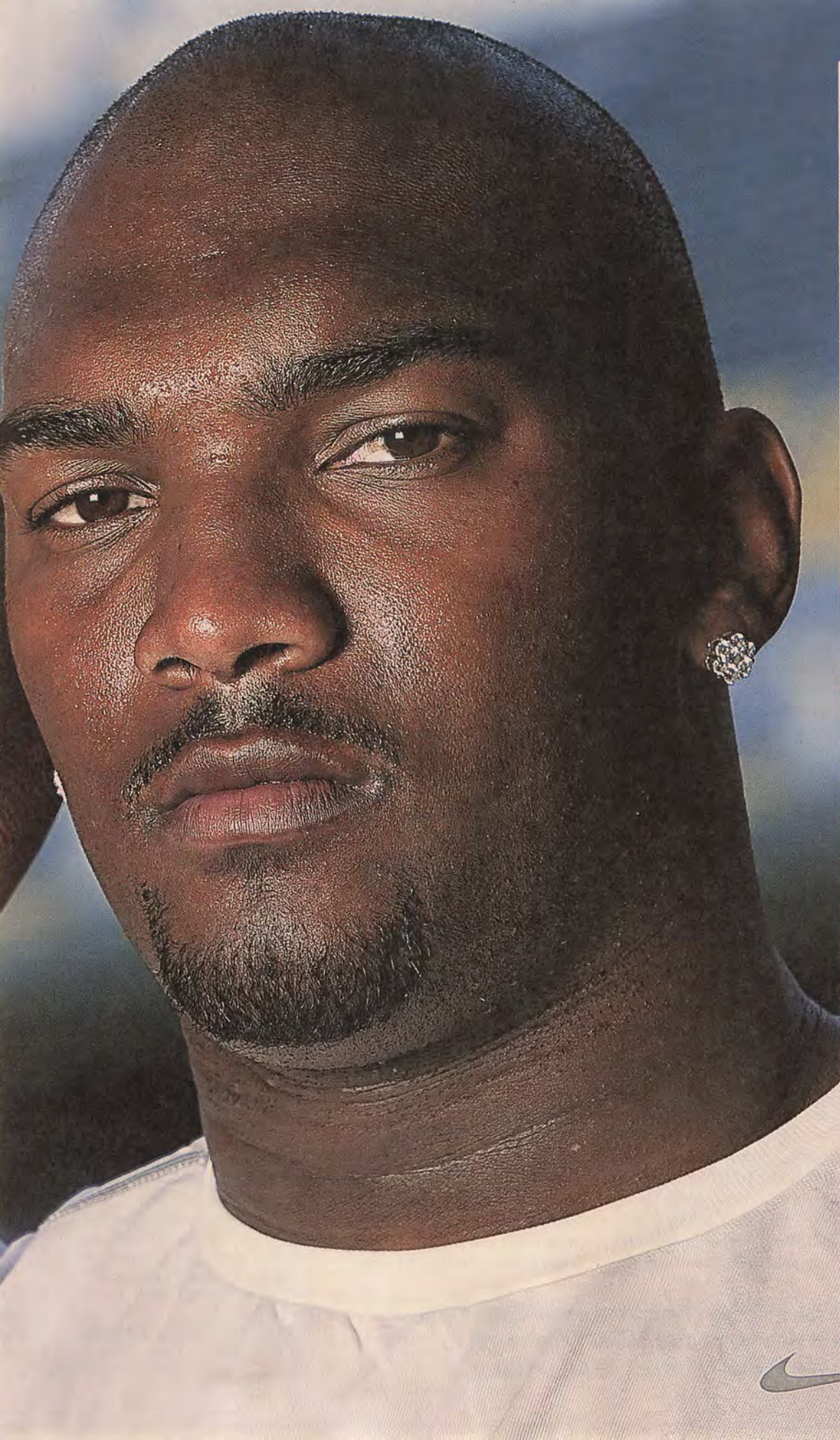


Photo by
Albert Dickson / SN



If only the NFL defenses JaMarcus Russell will face were this vulnerable.

Lining up to take a snap on a recent morning in Napa, Calif., Russell sees offensive coordinator Greg Knapp and another assistant positioned as safeties—and there's no one else to contend with.

The quarterback is supposed to alter his progression to match the positioning of the faux safeties. As Russell gets behind center, Knapp yells out, "Halfback uncovered! Halfback uncovered!"

Russell does exactly what he's supposed to do and fires a quick hitch to halfback Louis Rankin, who is split wide right. It's another tiny victory for both the quarterback and the Oakland Raiders, another microstep on the path to greatness—or at least respectability.

There is little debate, inside or outside the organization, that Russell is the key to Oakland's short-term and long-term prospects. The Raiders haven't had consistently solid execution from the quarterback position since 2002, Rich Gannon's last healthy season. It's no coincidence that was the team's last winning season. Since then, the Raiders are 19-61. And after muddling through the bumpy commands of Kerry Collins, Marques Tuiasosopo, Aaron Brooks, Andrew Walter, Daunte Culpepper and Josh McCown, the team is going to place the ball firmly in Russell's hands, for better or worse.

"Everybody on the team gets paid off of what I do and the rest of the team does," Russell says. "I hate to say it, but I'm accountable for a lot of the guys' families."

That's a heavy load for a 22-year-old athlete, but he's right. And Lane Kiffin knows it.

"He has to play well for us to win," the Raiders' coach says bluntly. "The quarterback touches the ball every snap. That's why he's so valuable. Obviously, he's going to have a lot to do with our success, and the faster that we can



Kiffin (front) and the Raiders have brought their young quarterback along as slowly as they could, but this season, Russell (2) won't be watching from the sideline.

get him ready, the more we get him the ball, the better we'll be."

Hence, much of the Raiders' focus in the past year has been on getting their prodigious young quarterback up to speed. The preparation started after a protracted contract holdout kept him out of last year's training camp. Quarterbacks coach John DeFilippo worked one-on-one with Russell nearly every day—including Sundays. The draft's No. 1 overall pick, Russell would submit to a strenuous workout hours before a game, then shower and change into his uniform, resigned to standing on the sideline as the third quarterback.

After he played in four games and started one at the end of last season, Russell's education began in earnest. He showed up at the Raiders' practice facility in Alameda, Calif., 10 days before the first minicamp to begin huddling with coaches and the strength staff. Most of the players hung around for three or four hours during voluntary practices; Russell's typical day was 5½ to six hours—position meetings, lifting, running and throwing to receivers. He met with Knapp and DeFilippo every Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

The coaches gave him study

guides and DVDs to take home every week, then threw quizzes at him in the classroom: What's your progression here? What's your footwork? Who's your first read on the defense? Gradually, Russell became immersed in Kiffin's offense, much more than he had been while taking the field as a rookie.

Along the way, Raiders coaches say, they realized Russell had an aptitude for X's and O's. DeFilippo remembers diagraming a play—Dual Right 2 Jet Z Drive at the corner—on a white board during the prospect's first interview with the team at the 2007 Scouting Combine in Indianapolis. Then he erased the play and asked Russell to re-create it. Russell did well; no big deal.

The surprise came several months later when the Raiders visited LSU's pro day. Almost on a lark, DeFilippo asked Russell if he could draw up the play again, and he wrote it out flawlessly.

"And that's the thing a lot of people underestimated about JaMarcus," DeFilippo says. "All they see is the 6-6 frame, the big body, the big arm. They don't understand that he's got a tremendous brain up top. You rarely have

to tell him things twice."

As Russell has absorbed the offense, his teammates have begun to follow him as the leader—an admittedly low-key one.

"I see him in the huddle," tight end Zach Miller says. "He's more comfortable, so that makes him more confident. He's able to get in there and get control of the huddle, call the play. He's not making any mistakes calling the plays anymore. And he's giving the little checks, the little information before the play, the kind of 'heads-up, guys.'"

The cram sessions, for the most part, have ended. Players' schedules are so regimented during training camp there isn't much extra time for study. And playing against live, padded defenders is more valuable, anyway.

"JaMarcus cannot get enough reps," DeFilippo says. "There are not enough reps in this world for him to get. ... I mean, I don't want to say he's a rookie this year, but he hasn't had a ton of time."

Russell is taking the vast majority of first-team snaps in Napa, whether in 7-on-7 or 11-on-11 drills. No matter what the assignment, Russell confers with a coach after nearly every series, or even every throw. Sometimes it's Kiffin,

Every minute counts

How do you get a young quarterback ready in a jiffy? JaMarcus Russell's schedule on the morning of July 29, a typical training camp practice day for him, shows how the Raiders do it.

9 a.m.—A walk-through against a scout defense made up of nonessential offensive players.

9:24—Works on drops, sets and releases under the watchful eyes of coordinator Greg Knapp and QB coach John DeFilippo.

9:34—Slides downfield about 20 yards to work with backs on handoffs and pitches.

9:39—Runs through passing drills with receivers. Javon Walker drops a pass on a crossing route. On the next throw, Johnnie Lee Higgins does the same.

9:48—More walk-through reps, this time against a phantom defense. After a few minutes, the offense moves to the 3 to work on goal-line plays.

9:56—Time for 11-on-11. Russell gets the bulk of the first-team reps. On one play, he executes a nice play-action fake, then tosses a swing pass to wideout Ronald Curry.

10:11—More 11-on-11. Russell threads a short pass to Drew Carter between cornerback DeAngelo Hall and linebacker Kirk Morrison at the goal line. On the next play, he finds tight end Zach Miller open in the end zone.

10:19—The horn blows and the players change fields but pick up where they left off with 11-on-11. At one point, Russell and rookie running back Darren McFadden both find themselves on the field with the second-team offense and defense. "Probably our most physical practice of camp, (with) short-yardage and goal-line," coach Lane Kiffin says later. "Ran about 85 team plays today, so it was good to sting 'em a little bit this morning."

10:30—Back to 7-on-7, with Russell throwing to backs, wide receivers and tight ends against linebackers and defensive backs. Higgins redeems himself with a leaping catch of Russell's pass against cornerback Stanford Routt.

10:42—Back to 11-on-11, some of it with moving chains. Walker gets a step on cornerback Nnamdi Asomugha on a post route, but Russell hangs the pass and Asomugha recovers to break it up. A little later, Russell bangs his right elbow on McFadden's helmet while throwing; Russell was held out of a couple of practices because of soreness but recovered quickly.

10:56—Three horns sound. Practice is over. —Phil Barber

'He has some good practices, and then he makes some throws where you're like, "All right, this is why we're doing this." You've got to remember that he's still a young kid.'—John DeFilippo, Raiders quarterbacks coach

sometimes Knapp, sometimes DeFilippo. To their credit, it's seldom more than one coach at a time.

The results, in truth, have been mixed. Russell had at least one practice where he seemed to do no wrong. More often, he has looked like an inexperienced quarterback—albeit one with a Hall of Fame arm. He seems to be making good reads most of the time, and his ballhandling has gotten much smoother. But his deep timing passes are inconsistent, and he still throws behind receivers on crossing routes too frequently.

"He has some good practices, and

then he makes some throws where you're like, 'All right, this is why we're doing this,'" DeFilippo says. "You've got to remember that he's still a young kid. The kid's not going to be 23 till August 9. I've got to remind myself sometimes."

Nevertheless, Russell makes at least a few throws every day that quicken the pulse of everyone on the field. He can fire the ball a mile, yes. More amazing are the times when he's moving backward in the face of a rush and throws a 20-yard dart with an almost casual flick of the wrist. There might not be another quarterback in the league who can

match such throws.

But Kiffin isn't necessarily enthralled with the highlight spirals. He has said he wants Russell to complete 65 percent of his passes this season.

"That's all the stuff that wows the fans and people watching, but that's not what makes you a good quarterback," he says. "A good quarterback plays with great discipline, he takes care of the ball, and he throws things on time. We're going to have to get that going with him."

DeFilippo says the three main areas of focus during camp are decision making, timing and accuracy. And Russell does seem to be getting it, especially given his lack of experience. Remember, the rigors of training camp are a new experience for Russell. And though he did get game action last year, that action was tightly controlled by Kiffin, who was adamant about keeping the rookie out of negative situations.

"I like what I see," says Jim Fassel, a former NFL head coach and quarterbacks guru who observed practices in Napa for two days while visiting his son John, a Raiders assistant. "The

biggest thing is, they handled it right, trying to get him in (slowly). I really feel sorry for the guys that got to get thrown into it right now. It's a tough deal; they lose their confidence."

The Raiders worked Russell in gradually, but now there is only so much Kiffin can do to protect Russell with play-calling. The Raiders should be able to run the ball in 2008, and that will help, but are tackles Kwame Harris and Cornell Green adequate pass blockers? Can Javon Walker or any of the other Oakland receivers make big plays? And if the Raiders' defense can't stop the rush, will Russell constantly be playing from behind?

"We are close with him," DeFilippo says. "We're so close. It's like he's getting ready to explode." But that's the enthusiastic young assistant coach talking. A more jaded observer might preach patience.

Expect some ragged moments for Russell. Only with a further influx of talent to Oakland—maybe a year from now, maybe two—will we really be able to judge what happens when attention to detail intersects with one mighty arm. **SN**

Sizing up JaMarcus Russell: Is weight really an issue?

It didn't take long for the question to pop up. It was, in fact, about four minutes into JaMarcus Russell's first training camp media session that it arrived like a jab to the gut.

How much do you weigh?

The answer: 269 pounds. A reporter followed up by asking Russell how much he weighed as a rookie in 2007.

"Last year, at the end of the season, the most I've ever been was 300 pounds," Russell said. He paused only slightly. "I'm just joking. I was 276."

It's probably a good sign that the second-year quarterback can make light of the situation. It is, no doubt, an enduring frustration to the Raiders that the weight question dogs Russell like a blitzing linebacker.

Concerns about Russell's conditioning began at least as early as the 2007 Scouting Combine weigh-ins, where Notre Dame quarterback Brady Quinn looked like a bodybuilder and the giant from LSU looked

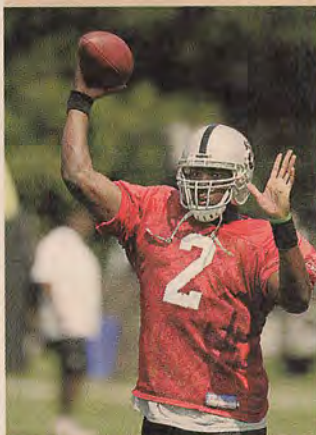
like a Popeyes taste-tester. Russell never appeared handicapped by his weight during his brief playing time as a rookie, but the rumors hit a crescendo in early March when one NFL writer said Russell's weight had ballooned to 300.

By the time the media got a peek at Russell in mid-May, however, he looked more or less the same as ever.

"We're working on his eating habits, and he's always going to get an extra cardio (workout)," quarterbacks coach John DeFilippo says. "One of the things he did in the offseason when he first got here was got a ton of extra cardio. He's lost some weight. His weight right now is stable."

The Raiders didn't think they were getting Drew Brees when they drafted Russell. They knew they were selecting a quarterback as big as most defensive ends. And if he can bounce off an occasional pass rusher and rumble downfield at 270 pounds, they're fine with it.

"This morning, kid took off and ran, and I'm not sure (defensive end) Derrick Burgess caught him," DeFilippo said last week. "So once the kid gets going, that's a big man running fast." —Phil Barber



Russell is working on his eating habits, but don't call him fat.

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Putting on a clinic

NFL

When it comes to having to rehab star players, the Colts are second to none among Super Bowl contenders *By Matt Crossman*

One sure sign a surgery is big-time is when it is named after somebody. Tommy John surgery signals a major problem for a pitcher. Dwight Freeney's foot surgery has a big-time label, too. Only Freeney's was named not for an athlete but for a French surgeon who worked in Napoleon's army and died in 1847. So forgive the Colts defensive end if he was unfamiliar with his injury's namesake. "I was like, 'Who's Liz Fraunk?'"

Not Liz Fraunk. Lisfranc. As in, Jacques Lisfranc de St. Martin. That's far too long of a name for a surgery, so it has been shortened to Lisfranc.

Too bad the rehab can't be shortened, too. Eight months removed from surgery and seven months into rehab, Freeney is still not 100 percent recovered, but it's not for lack of effort. He has tested his foot, tested it again, run in water, run on the ground, cut gingerly, cut aggressively, all without a major setback, which is not to say he's anything close to pain-free or even doubt-free. "You run and you're like, 'Can I still cut? Can I still move? Can I still spin?'"

The answers are yes, yes and yes,

which is good news for the cuttingest, bursting-outtiest, turn-full-speed-on-a-dimey-ist and blocker-embarasingest defensive end in all the land. And in addition to rehabbing, he has boned up on what ails him. "I could pretty much give you whatever you need to know about the injury," he says. Perhaps a biography of ol' Jacques Lisfranc de St. Martin will be forthcoming. "I could tell you when it was created. I could tell you what happened: (Someone) fell off a horse, foot got caught in the saddle."

(He's right, by the way. Lisfranc first diagnosed the injury after a horseman did just that.)

Freeney isn't the only superstar missing time at Colts camp. Quarterback Peyton Manning and safety Bob Sanders did not practice in the team's first week of camp, either. The three are expected to be out until the middle of August. They will miss at least the team's first two preseason games.

If one star misses time during camp, no big deal. If two can't go, you start to wonder. When three are on the shelf, it overshadows the rest of a team's preseason. "I think it is a huge concern," says Marcellus Wiley, who played 10



Freeney may look fast
in camp, but the Colts will
take it slow with him and
their other injured stars.

years in the NFL and now analyzes the game for ESPN and Sporting News Radio. "When your most severe weapons are all ailing, it makes it tough psychologically. They can still be a great team, but it definitely creeps into a player's mind."

An important part of team-building takes place in the locker room after practice, when players break down what they just went through. "When you're not part of that, you start to feel outside the lines," Wiley says. "You don't make the club in the cold tub."

For the first several days of camp, Peyton Manning wasn't even in the cold tub. He was at home in Indianapolis, his knee immobilized, with an IV in his arm and a tube draining fluid out of his knee. When he finally arrived in Terre Haute, it was bizarre; the team admitted he was in town but wouldn't say where.

Manning woke up July 14 in excruciating pain. He flew from New Orleans to Indianapolis, saw a doctor and had surgery to remove an infected bursa sac from his left knee. All in the same day.

Because it's an infection, not an injury, the key to Manning's return is ridding the knee of the infection. He was pain-free a few days after the surgery, but he was expected to be out until mid-August. "He's got to rehab, and that is slow going because it's debilitating," says team president Bill Polian. "It's not an easy thing to overcome, but all



'Losing Peyton Manning is like losing the quarterback and the offensive coordinator at the same time.'

—Cris Collinsworth, NBC and NFL Network analyst

the signs are positive."

Though Manning wasn't at camp, everybody was talking about him. And here's the weird thing: If backup Jim Sorgi weren't wearing No. 12, onlookers at Colts camp might have never known Manning was missing. In the pocket, Sorgi's body language is like Manning's—all jittery and fussy and ants-in-his-pantsy. If Manning isn't back by the time the games start, the differences will be more obvious. Manning is arguably the least replaceable player in the NFL. If he's not ready for the September 7 opener, it would be a big deal—

far bigger than if Sanders or Freeney weren't ready.

"(Losing) Peyton Manning is like losing the quarterback and the offensive coordinator at the same time," says NBC and NFL Network analyst Cris Collinsworth. "The Colts are going to have to fight hard to win this division with everyone healthy. Without Peyton, it would be impossible."

But that might be looking too far ahead. All indications are Manning will be back in time to start the regular season and christen the team's new stadium. Whether he will be 100 percent healthy and will have worked out the kinks after missing several weeks of practice, he can't say. When he wasn't on campus at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology for reporting day or the first practice, those were the first team events he had missed in his career.

"This is pretty uncharted territory for me," he says. "I don't have an idea how much time I need because I've never had to experience it."

His teammates were confident he would need little time to get back in the groove. His key receivers—Reggie Wayne, Marvin Harrison and Dallas Clark—have been with the Colts for at least five years. Plus, the team has the same offensive philosophy it has had for years. Plus, this is Peyton Manning, he of the legendary preparation. Even with his knee immobilized, he has watched film, worked out his rotator cuff and thrown the ball a little bit.

"Two days. I give him two days," says center Jeff Saturday. "If you knew how many balls he threw in the offseason, how many routes were run, how much offense has been run up to this—it may even be Day 1, but definitely by Day 2, we'll be full-cylinder."

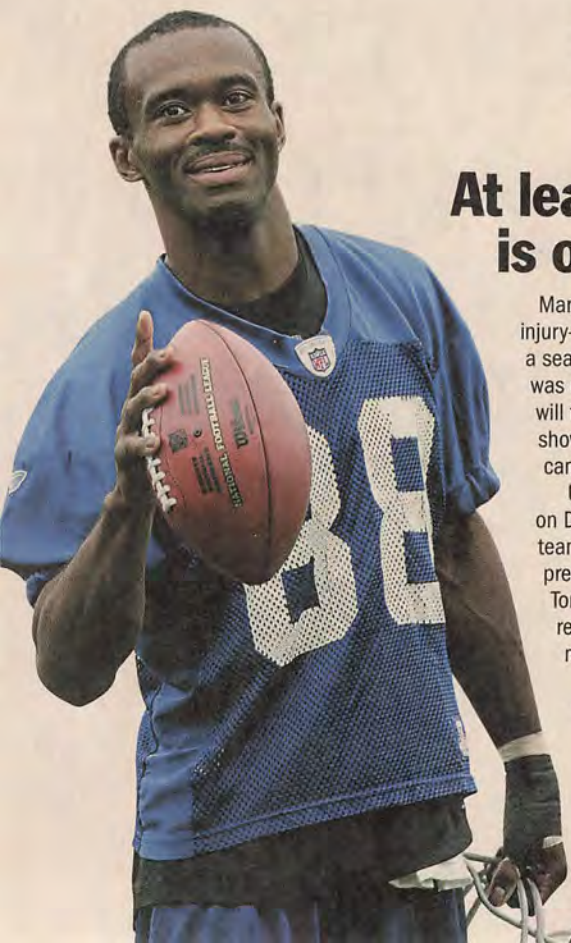
At least Harrison is on the field

Marvin Harrison missed 11 games last year with a knee injury—the only time he has missed more than four during a season in his 12-year career. As camp started, there was concern that either the knee or his age—Harrison will turn 36 on August 25—would slow him down. He showed no evidence of problems in the first week of camp, but the team is keeping a close eye on him.

Unlike his banged-up teammates, Harrison practiced on Day 1, significantly ahead of original predictions. The team limited him to one practice per day early on as a precaution. "Marvin is a guy that defies logic," coach Tony Dungy says. "I think he is going to be fine and ready to go, but we are trying to have somewhat of a monitor on him."

Harrison was held out of Sunday's preseason opener against Washington and is expected to miss the team's second game against Carolina, too. Dungy says sitting Harrison is precautionary and not a reflection of his performance in camp.

—Matt Crossman



By any name, it's a tricky injury



When these bones break, pain comes quickly, even if a diagnosis doesn't.

Lisfranc fractures occur to a cluster of bones on top of the foot between the ankle and the toes. They are difficult to diagnose because the symptoms are similar to sprains and because X-rays sometimes don't reveal the injury.

Dr. David Caldarella, who has treated amateur, collegiate and professional athletes for Lisfranc fractures, says successful surgery is the most important factor in a patient's recovery. That's especially true for Dwight Freeney because he puts a lot of strain on that area of his feet.

"Most athletes with this injury who undergo surgery successfully may return to their pre-injury status," says Caldarella, co-director of the Complex Foot and Ankle Clinic at Gunderson Lutheran Medical Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin. "However, this is a severe foot injury that has been known to end careers of elite and/or professional athletes—even despite excellent surgical care." —Matt Crossman

If Bob Sanders keeps hitting the way he does, maybe an injury will be named after him—for one he inflicts. "He hit the fullback, Greg Jones, from Jacksonville, last year, decleated him. The guy is way bigger than Bob," says Colts cornerback Marlin Jackson. "I just stopped in my tracks and said, 'Wow.'"

Sanders is recovering after battering ram surgery—wait, shoulder surgery. He missed a chunk of camp last season and still was the NFL defensive player of the year. Sanders routinely misses practice during the season as he heals from the injuries one would expect a cannonball with cleats to endure. He says he needs a few weeks of practice to be sure he's ready for the season.

Sanders' presence in the Colts' defensive backfield is vital to that unit's success. "A lot of things we do are predicated on him being a playmaker," says Colts defensive coordinator Ron Meeks. "With him not being in there, it takes away from our effectiveness."

The opposing offense has to account for where he is, and he hits so ferociously and so frequently that even opponents can't resist hyperbole. "That guy, we played against him, and he makes like every tackle," says Giants wide receiver Amani Toomer. "If someone breaks the line, he's around it. He's knocking balls away. Everything he does is game-changing. He's integral to that team."

Sanders will use the time off the field to prepare mentally. He asks other players what they do to prepare and studies how others study. He keeps extensive notes in a three-subject notebook; he fills a couple of them each season. He draws diagrams of the field, makes notes about formations and jots down ideas about backfield sets and receiver alignments.

"We're all fast. We're all strong," Sanders says. "It's 90 percent mental. The more mentally prepared you are, the better you're able to play."



'We played against Bob Sanders, and he makes every tackle. ... Everything he does is game-changing.'

—Amani Toomer, Giants wide receiver

one in the first part of camp. The team must balance giving him enough practice to get him ready for the season against overdoing it and causing a setback. Freeney is confident the surgery was a success. Still, he expects his foot will hurt on and off all season.

Few players have as much of an impact on the defense—and the opponent's offense—as Freeney. When teams prepare to face the Colts' defense, Freeney's name often comes up in the first sentence. "Certainly when you talk about the Colts, you have to talk about No. 93 and how you're going to block him," says Rich Gannon, a former NFL quarterback who calls games for CBS.

Opposing offenses have to pull out all kinds of tricks to keep Freeney at bay. They load up his side of the ball, either with a tight end or a running back, which often doesn't work anyway. "How many times have you seen the running back end up hitting the guy he's supposed to be helping and not Dwight Freeney?" says Randy Cross, a colleague of Gannon's at CBS.

Even if Freeney were limited during the season, his presence would give the defense a boost. "He does so many things the camera doesn't see," says defensive tackle Ed Johnson, who lines up next to Freeney. Like, the two players' meetings in their hotel room the night before a game to go over their signs.

"Nobody can just jump right in," Johnson says. "Whatever he needs, I'm sure he'll get it. He's been doing it for a long time. He knows his body better than anybody else."

And thanks to a long dead French surgeon, he knows it better than he ever wanted to. **SN**

The mental preparation might drive Freeney batty. He's had enough of thinking about playing. He wants to get out there and hit somebody ("Preferably a quarterback. An offensive lineman will do for now.") Keeping him off the field figures to be a big challenge for the coaches. The first day of camp, he put on his jersey and stalked the sideline as his teammates practiced. He occasionally got down in his stance and practiced cutting, bursting out and turning full-speed on a dime. There were no blockers, good or bad, to embarrass.

That's likely as close as he'll get to hitting some-

In every BCS conference, there's a less-than-a-sure-thing team that has an awful lot riding on the arm of its QB

By Dave Curtis

QUARTERBACK

p r e s s u r e

BIG TEN: Curtis Painter, Sr., Purdue

Curtis Painter sat alone in the ballroom with his dreams spread before him on a table. Boilermakers athletic officials had laid out their early Heisman Trophy campaign for the fifth-year senior: a calendar full of action photos and a highlight DVD entitled *Painting a Masterpiece*.

"I watched it on a plane, and I thought it was pretty cool," Painter says. "But I think my mom is going to enjoy it even more than me."

Painter is the latest in a string of successful Boilermakers quarterbacks. There's Bob Griese, who is now an analyst for ABC. Drew Brees swings through town at least once a year and chats with Painter each time. Painter's closest connection is with Kyle Orton, the Chicago Bear who preceded him as Purdue's starter. And the legacy's current watchman says he doesn't hesitate to talk to those who have gone before him.

"It's great to know a lot of those guys," Painter says. "To get to talk with Drew and get his advice, and to just call up Kyle and know how much he helps me out—it's really a great thing."

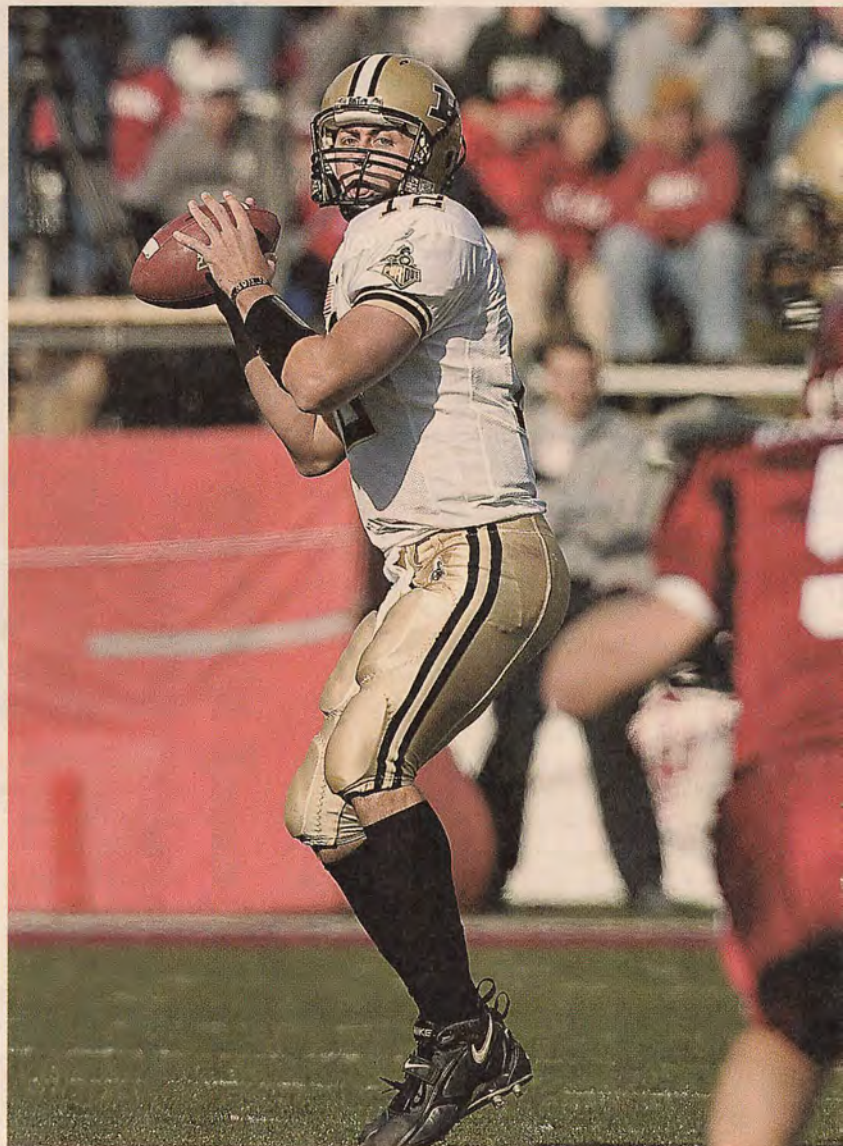
As a kid in Vincennes, Ind., Painter watched Brees and Orton turn the Boilers into a perennial bowl team and occasional conference title contender. Now, with Painter near the end of a career in the same Joe Tiller-conceived spread offense Brees and Orton once led, comparisons are valid. With the help of some extra regular-season games, Painter seems a sure bet to break several of Brees' career passing records if he stays healthy in 2008.

But Painter is keeping his view more big-picture and hopes any sort of Heisman run coincides with at least a 10-win season. Purdue will make trips to Notre Dame, Ohio State and Michigan State, but skipping Illinois and Wisconsin in the Big Ten will be an advantage.

Regardless of the schedule, Painter appears to possess the physical skills to fulfill the masterpiece expectations his school has set.

"First time we were just throwing it around, the first pass I caught, it tore my glove," senior receiver Greg Orton says. "I was like, 'Wow, this guy is for real.' And all he has done since then is work hard and get better."

After going 8-5 last season, Purdue hopes its record will get better—and those hopes rest squarely on Painter's right shoulder.



BIG 12: Todd Reesing, Jr., Kansas

Todd Reesing's dream season ended in the Orange Bowl, when he and his teammates celebrated a victory over ACC champ Virginia Tech. He led the previously irrelevant Jayhawks to 12 wins with 33 touchdown passes against only seven interceptions—not bad for a guy who didn't own the starting job when practices began.

Now, with the core of that Kansas squad gone, Reesing is back to try for a suitable encore. Running back Brandon McAnderson is gone, as are deep threat Marcus Henry and defensive leader Aqib Talib. Another BCS trip will be impossible without an even more staggering season from Reesing.

"The offense is going to depend on his leadership," KU coach Mark Mangino says. "He'll be able to handle that pretty well."

Tiny as quarterbacks go (5-11, 200), Reesing will spend the season facing defenses focused on slowing him and favorite wideout Dexter Fields. And Reesing will need to succeed under that pressure to keep Kansas among college football's elite.

"It's awesome to see," Reesing says, "that people aren't looking at us as the doormat in the Big 12 anymore, that we're going to compete for a championship."



SEC: John Parker Wilson, Sr., Alabama

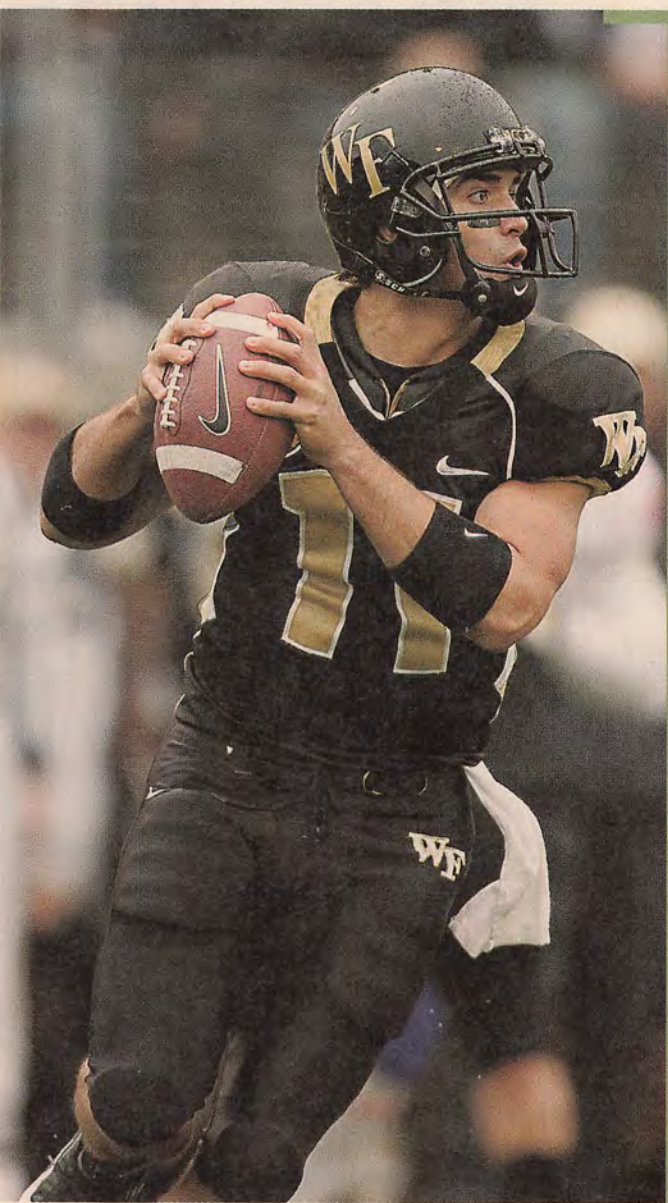
Another football season, another new offensive coordinator for Alabama quarterback John Parker Wilson. After learning Dave Rader's plays as a freshman backup and running them as a sophomore starter, he spent a season under Major Applewhite. Now, Wilson must adjust to Jim McElwain, imported from Fresno State to spice up the Crimson Tide's schemes.

"There's a little more diversity," Alabama coach Nick Saban says of the new looks. "(The offense is) a little more quarterback-friendly."

Saban insisted this offseason that the offense would look similar to the one Alabama ran in 2007. Wilson knows there will be an adjustment, though—he has a new package, reads and terminology dancing through his head again.

It figures that Wilson's career is concluding with more inconsistency. He has started 26 consecutive games for Alabama and has 13 victories and 13 losses. His 35 touchdown passes and 22 interceptions over that time are further evidence of uneven play.

Wilson has plenty of help this season. Alabama returns its top three rushers, including 800-yard back Terry Grant. And although top target D.J. Hall has gone to the NFL, freshman Julio Jones could emerge as one of the nation's top young receivers. That leaves Wilson to make the right choices and lift the Tide, and his legacy, above simply average.



ACC: Riley Skinner, Jr., Wake Forest

Half of Riley Skinner's college career lies in front of him, yet he has already built one of the best resumes in school history. No Deacons starting quarterback has won more games than Skinner's 18. And nobody has come close to the success he shepherded in 2006, when Wake won the ACC title and faced Louisville in the Orange Bowl.

Yet Skinner's reputation is more game manager than game-breaker, and his accomplishments seem overshadowed by his league's lack of success and his program's lack of tradition. That reality has his teammates stumped.

"Man, he gets no respect," Wake cornerback Alphonso Smith says. "We hear people say all the time that he's not this or not that. You know what he is? He's a winner. How about that?"

How about this—a big year from Skinner could lift the Deacons back to the top of a wide-open ACC. Sure, he'll never be as talented or loved as the other Jacksonville-reared quarterback in major-college football (see: Tebow, Timothy). But more steady play will take pressure of stud tailback Josh Adams and might bring Skinner some overdue respect.

BIG EAST: Tyler Lorenzen, Sr., Connecticut

On the sideline, in the huddle and at the line, Tyler Lorenzen, a junior college transfer, spent parts of last preseason lost in the UConn offense. He needed a guide, yielding at times to receiver and former QB D.J. Hernandez for in-the-moment assistance.

The confusion helped lead to a mess on offense in the fall. Opponents stacked the line every Saturday, and the Huskies averaged 185.8 passing yards per game, good for 97th in the nation. But teammates and coach Randy Edsall insist things have changed.

"Last summer, going into seven-on-seven, D.J. pretty much helped him out, calling the plays," cornerback Darius Butler says. "Now, Tyler calls the plays. He does everything."

A spring strengthening his arm and studying film with offensive coordinator Rob Ambrose has left Lorenzen much more confident.

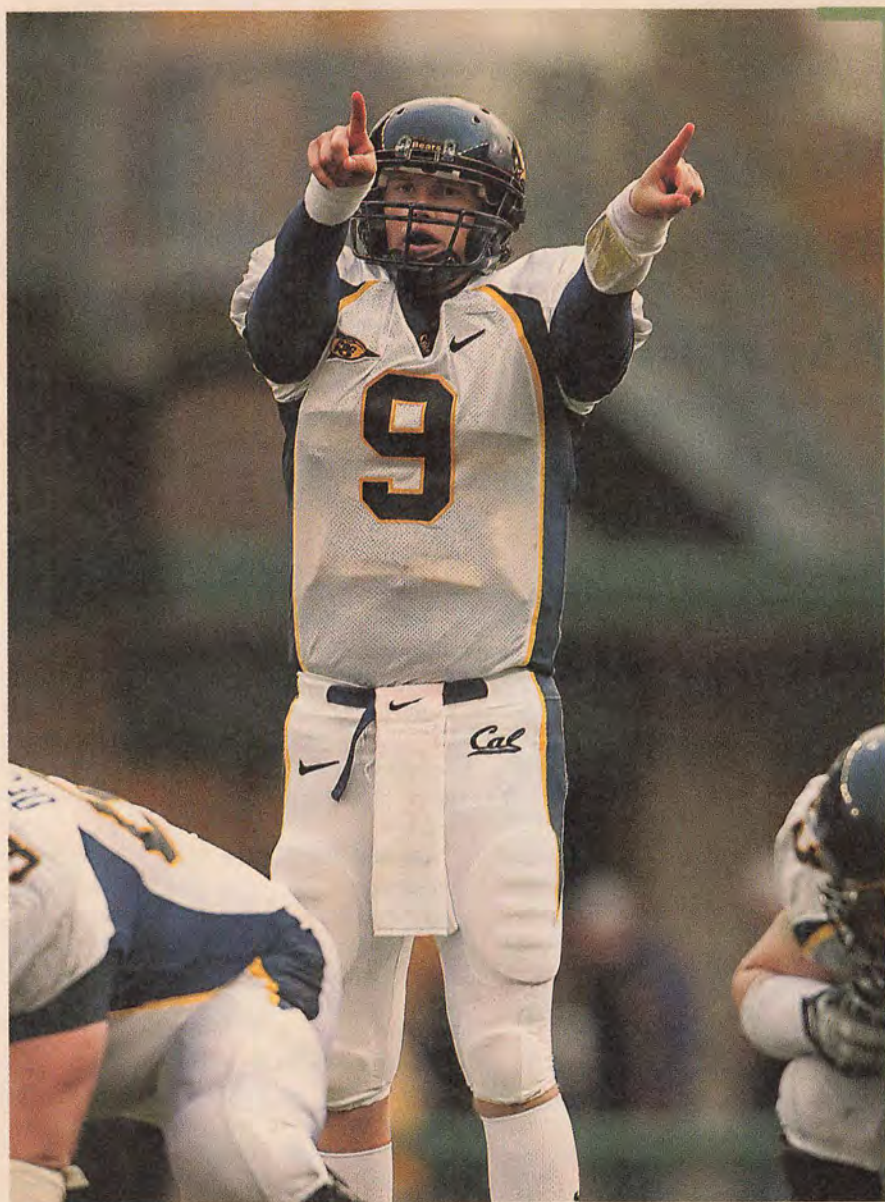
"I just feel like I have a better grasp of the offense," he says. "I think I can offer something to it this year."

Edsall says the Huskies will remain a run-first outfit, a nod to his team's lack of flashy playmakers and the cold weather they play in late in the year. Still, UConn's hopes for a second straight bowl appearance, something the young program has never accomplished, rest on Lorenzen's ability to balance the offense.

"We'll be fine," Edsall says.

"When we need to throw it, we can throw it."





PAC-10: Nate Longshore, Sr., California

When Nate Longshore's ankle buckled at Oregon last September, Cal's hopes for a national championship crumbled with it. Longshore returned two games later, but the Bears, once ranked No. 2 in the nation, bumbled through the rest of the regular season, finishing 1-6 and fading to the Armed Forces Bowl. The low point came in the game after Longshore was hurt, when the Bears melted down late against Oregon State with Longshore watching from the sideline.

Longshore is healthy again, but there's a different Cal team around him. Playmakers DeSean Jackson and Lavelle Hawkins are gone, and Kevin Riley, who led the Bears to a bowl victory over Air Force, will challenge for Longshore's job in training camp. Coach Jeff Tedford is expected to name a starter on the eve of the opener against Michigan State.

"Nate has played in a lot of games and won a lot of games for us," Tedford told reporters at Pac-10 media days. "Kevin Riley had a couple opportunities last season. It's going to be very competitive."

But for Cal to contend in the conference, it must be Longshore who elevates his play. Three starters return on the offensive line, but a slew of young skill players makes the fifth-year senior vital to the Bears. **SN**

The little guys are counting on their big guns, too

Dan LeFevour, Jr., Central Michigan. Ball State wanted LeFevour, a tall, mobile quarterback, and Eastern Michigan offered a scholarship, too. But Central Michigan ended up signing the kid out of suburban Chicago, and the move launched the Chippewas to the top of the Mid-American Conference. Still, the list of schools who *didn't* want him sticks with LeFevour today.

"He was so unheralded coming in," says Cincinnati coach Brian Kelly, who recruited LeFevour to CMU. "He still has that feeling on his shoulder that he wants to prove everybody wrong."

LeFevour did that last season, when, as a sophomore, he became the second Division I-A player to throw for 3,000 yards and rush for 1,000. He also became the second player to throw for 20 touchdowns and score 20 more (19 rushing, one receiving). The company he keeps in those categories—Vince Young for yards, Tim Tebow for scoring—shows that he probably could have held his own in a BCS conference.

"It's just an honor to be compared with those guys," LeFevour says. "Tim Tebow, I mean, he's the Heisman Trophy winner. It's nice to be in the same sentence as him."

At least one national television appearance (against Ball State on November 19) and trips to Georgia, Indiana and Purdue give LeFevour a chance to compete for national individual awards. But another MAC title is the top priority. And, considering he accounted for more than three-quarters of the Chippewas' offense last season, it'll be up to him to make it happen.

Max Hall, Jr., BYU. An Arizona State transfer, Hall passed for 3,848 yards as a sophomore last season and helped the Cougars win the Mountain West. September wins at Washington and against UCLA would set up Hall for a Heisman run and BYU for a chance at a BCS bowl.

Brian Johnson, Sr., Utah. A third-year starter recruited out of Texas by Urban Meyer's staff, Johnson could spoil coach Rich Rodriguez's debut in Utah's opener at Michigan.

Nate Davis, Jr., Ball State. With 20 starts over the past two years, he already holds the school record for passing touchdowns (48). Davis has had big games on big stages: 422 passing yards at Nebraska (a 41-40 loss last year), and 250 at Michigan (a 34-26 loss in '06). —Dave Curtis



You have to bet there are some BCS schools kicking themselves for passing on LeFevour.

Boston filled a need, but Chicago may have created a logjam at the trading deadline.

Matching Sox? Bay fits, Griffey doesn't

By Ryan Fagan

rfagan@sportingnews.com

Obviously, the ultimate winners and losers from 2008's trading season won't be determined until the final out of this fall's World Series. But that doesn't mean this isn't a good time to take a look at how this season's moves will affect which team will record that final out.

A whole new world

Aside from new Dodgers superstar Manny Ramirez—and really, isn't Manny perpetually in his own category?—the big names who swapped jerseys this July have had very little playoff success.

■ Angels first baseman Mark Teixeira has never been to the postseason.

■ Red Sox left fielder Jason Bay has never been to the postseason.

■ Phillies righthander Joe Blanton has pitched only two innings in the postseason.

■ Brewers lefthander CC Sabathia has four postseason starts, with a 2-2 record and 7.17 ERA.

■ Cubs righthander Rich Harden has one postseason start and an 0-2 record and 6.43 ERA overall.

■ Dodgers third baseman Casey Blake has a .256 career postseason batting average.

■ White Sox center fielder Ken Griffey has a .305 career postseason average, but his last playoff appearance was in 1997.

■ Yankees catcher Pudge Rodriguez has a .255 career postseason average but hit just .167 in 13 playoff games for the Tigers in 2006.

Clearly, some of these players are in for a bit of a surprise, and some will have to erase memories of past failures. All will have to adjust quickly; the postseason is an unforgiving time.

"That one (loss), as we quickly found out, can turn into three real quick," says Phillies shortstop Jimmy Rollins, who made the playoffs for the first time last season. "So it's not the same mindset as playing during the season. It's literally trying to win every single game. In the season, you do that also, but you know that's not going to happen, so you're OK with that."



Bay (above right) brought energy and improved defense to his new team. Griffey brought his bat—but the White Sox already have plenty of those.



Rollins' Phillies were swept by the Rockies in their Division Series last October, and Philadelphia is a safe bet to have another shot at the postseason this fall.

Ramirez, on the other hand, has made a career

of coming through in big postseason situations—remember his 10 RBIs and 1.290 OPS against the Indians in the ALCS last fall?—and has 24 homers and 64 RBIs on his playoff resume. That's a big reason the Dodgers felt he was worth whatever headaches he might bring. "He's obviously produced in the clutch, and he's done it on the biggest stages, the World Series," Dodgers general manager Ned Colletti said during his we-got-Manny conference call last Thursday. "When you put somebody like this in the midst of a lineup, I think you positively affect those who hit in front of him and even those who hit behind him."

Best answers

Teixeira with the Angels. Teixeira is perfect for the Angels. He's a Gold Glove-winning first baseman who slides into the all-important third spot in the lineup ahead of Vladimir Guerrero. "He gives them a big bat they needed for protection around Guerrero," an N.L. scout says. "He also gives them balance in the lineup as a switch hitter."

Bay with the Red Sox. A scout recently kept repeating the same phrase over and over about Bay: "solid all-around player." In other words, he's exactly what Ramirez is not. Bay seems an ideal match for the Red Sox; he's levelheaded, gives his all on every play and represents a big upgrade in the field.

Ramirez with the Dodgers. What the Dodgers needed more than anything was a reason for opposing pitchers to fear their lineup. Until last week, it just wasn't there. Manny gives L.A. an immediate swagger and forces pitchers to adjust the way they treat the entire lineup around him.

Biggest questions

The Diamondbacks' offense. Arizona doesn't have enough plate discipline or power to support a fantastic rotation. Even during the Diamondbacks' four-game winning streak last week, they scored more than three runs only once. They were the early favorites to land Teixeira but decided the price was too high. Of course, that was before the Dodgers brought in Ramirez.

Griffey with the White Sox. He's not exactly a perfect fit for this team. He gives Chicago another power bat, but it will be tough to divvy up at-bats among him, Nick Swisher, Paul Konerko and Jim Thome.

The Cardinals' bullpen. The front office refused to part with any of the organization's top prospects, and the bullpen that has already blown a major league-high 25 saves this year was left to fend for itself. Point of comparison: Mariano Rivera has blown 25 saves, too—in the past seven years. **SN**

INSIDE DISH

Rays OF/DH **Rocco Baldelli** finished his rehab stint at Class AA Montgomery with a .297 batting average and three home runs in 13 games. Baldelli, out since mid-May with a rare mitochondrial disorder that leaves him feeling fatigued, made an impression on his Biscuits teammates. "He's really just a man amongst boys down here," says LHP **David Price**, the No. 1 prospect in the Rays organization. "He's head and shoulders better than every pitcher he faces. When he gets out, he gets himself out, and he knows that. He's unbelievable. He hit a ball the other day that everybody thought was going to one-hop or two-hop the wall, and it went over the fence." ➤ **Rich Harden** and **Joe Blanton** are long gone, but the A's still have plenty of talented righthanded pitchers on the roster—including reliever **Brad Ziegler**, who has been an unlikely star by the Bay. Throwing a nasty ground ball-inducing sinker with a sidearm delivery, Ziegler entered the week with 32 scoreless innings pitched (in 25 appearances) to start his major league career. He had allowed only 19 hits and eight walks and has set the record for the most scoreless innings to start a career. All that after giving up just one run in 24⅓ innings at Class AAA Sacramento earlier this year. Ziegler's combined ERA this season is 0.15. ➤ The Twins were silent on the trade market last week but finally promoted much-ballyhooed LHP **Francisco Liriano** for the final two months of the season. Liriano, 24, missed the entire

2007 season recovering from elbow surgery, then struggled out of the gate with the Twins this spring. So the team sent him to Class AAA Rochester, where he found his groove and went 10-2 with a 3.28 ERA. Those numbers include a recent five-start stretch in which he allowed only one earned run and struck out 42 batters. "I wasn't ready when I was here (at the start of the season)," Liriano told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, "so I had to go down and get myself ready, get everything together." To make room for Liriano on the roster, the Twins cut RHP **Livan Hernandez**. ➤ If you happen to be on the West Coast this weekend, make the trip to Dodger Stadium for Saturday's Aflac All-American Game, the annual showcase of the best high school seniors in the country. Three Aflac alumni have been the No. 1 overall pick in the June draft—including this year's top pick, **Tim Beckham**—and 10 players from the 2007 game were first-round selections in 2008. This year, keep an eye on IF **Mychal Givens** (Plant HS/Tampa), LHP **Matthew Purke** (Klein HS/Spring, Texas) and OF **Donovan Tate** (Cartersville HS/Cartersville, Ga.). The game starts at 3 p.m. ET and will air on FOX Sports Net.

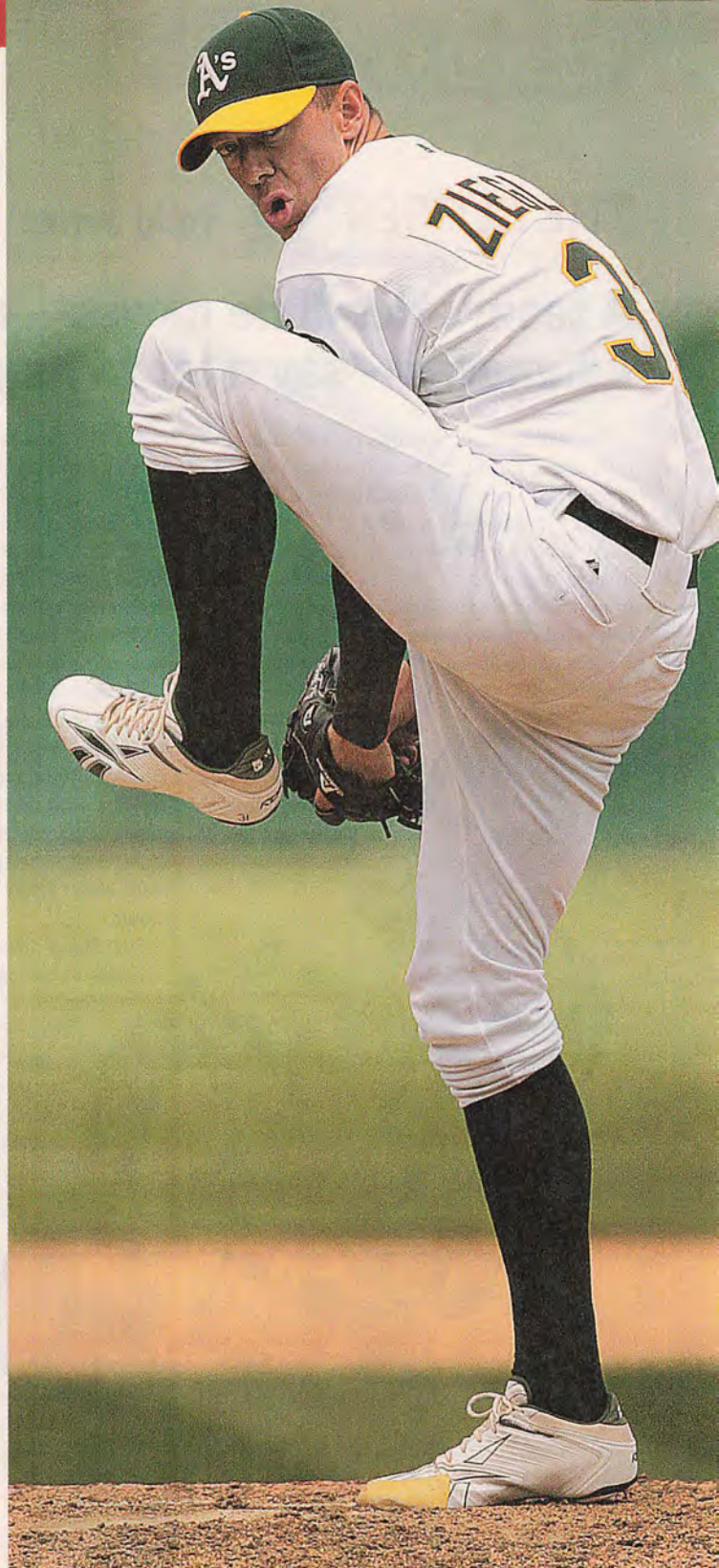
speedreads

Do not sleep on the Marlins. Sure, they didn't get Manny, but with power arms Josh Johnson and Anibal Sanchez back in the rotation after long injury layoffs, Florida is dangerous.

Carl Pavano is making rehab starts. All of New York is waiting on pins and needles for his return.

The Braves have been criticized for not getting more for Mark Teixeira, but first baseman Casey Kotchman, 25, is a great catch. He has a smooth glove and an improving bat and is under club control for three more seasons.

Ryan Fagan will check in with Manny Ramirez in his first full week with the Dodgers at sportingnews.com.



The A's traded away some big arms, but Ziegler's record-setting start has made it hard to miss them too much.

THE CLOSER



Todd Jones

A team's deadline moves—or nonmoves—say a lot to its players

The trading deadline brings hope to teams that have earned the right to be in the playoff mix. The Angels, Red Sox and even the Marlins were among the clubs that made a key move.

If you play for one of these teams, you're excited because you just got a piece of your puzzle filled from upstairs. You welcome the new guy because he can help you get where you want to go. All you are focused on is the gold ring at the end of the journey.

But what about the teams that stood pat, such as the Rays, Mets and Diamondbacks?

If you're on one of those teams, you

can't worry about what didn't happen. Instead, you look at it like this: The front office believes we're good enough with what we have. You say, "Cool," and continue on the journey. But in the back of your mind, you're saying, "Hey, wait a minute. We've busted our tails this long, we've never been here before, we're young, and a slugger or front-line pitcher sure would have been nice." Some of these young guys who haven't been in a race will wonder if they really are good enough.

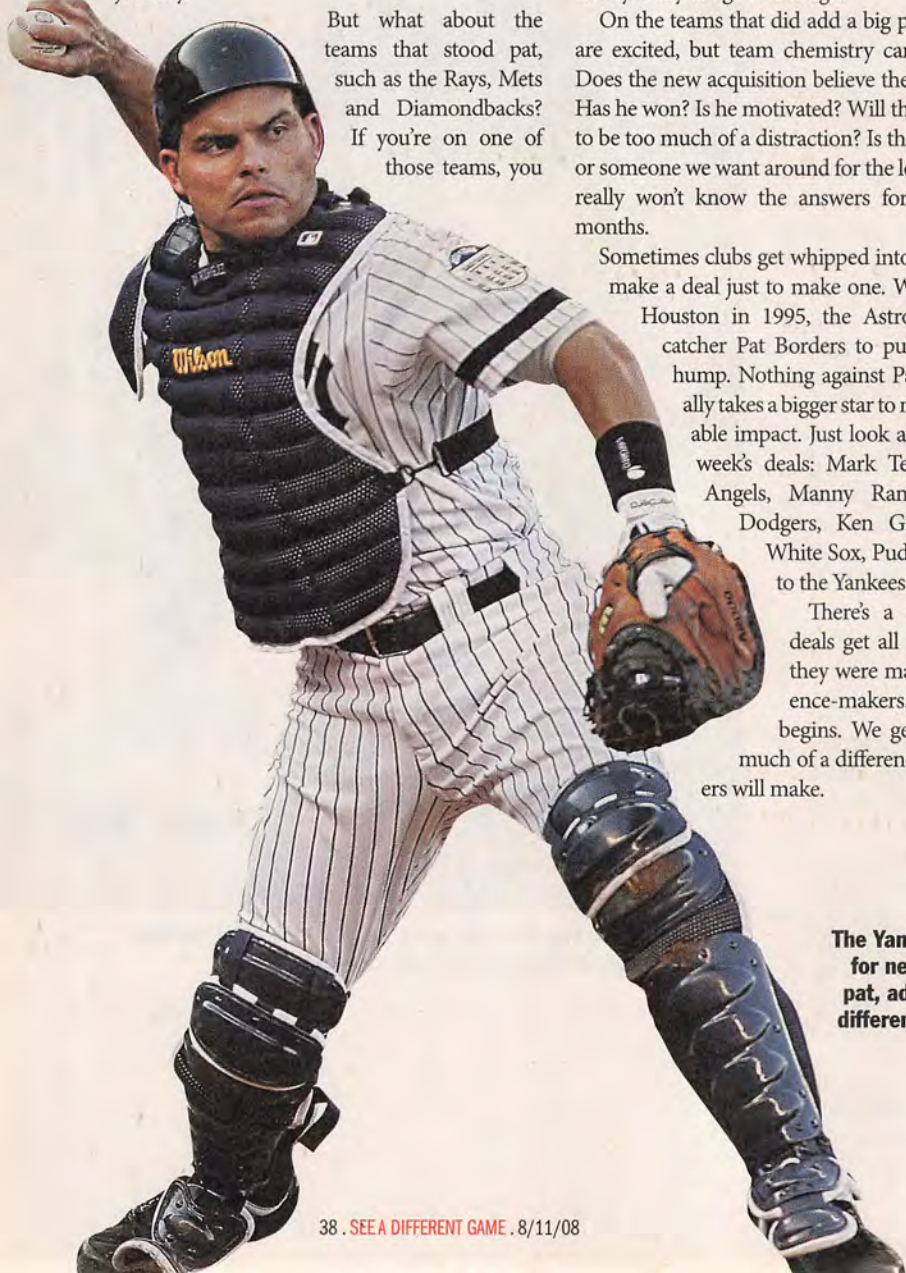
On the teams that did add a big piece, the guys are excited, but team chemistry can be affected. Does the new acquisition believe the way you do? Has he won? Is he motivated? Will the move prove to be too much of a distraction? Is this guy a rental or someone we want around for the long haul? You really won't know the answers for a couple of months.

Sometimes clubs get whipped into a frenzy and make a deal just to make one. When I was in

Houston in 1995, the Astros traded for catcher Pat Borders to put us over the hump. Nothing against Pat, but it usually takes a bigger star to make a noticeable impact. Just look at some of last week's deals: Mark Teixeira to the Angels, Manny Ramirez to the Dodgers, Ken Griffey to the White Sox, Pudge Rodriguez to the Yankees.

There's a reason those deals get all the attention; they were made for difference-makers. Now the fun begins. We get to see how much of a difference those players will make. **SN**

The Yankees, known for never standing pat, added another difference-maker in Rodriguez.



The week ahead

August 8-10

Whiff masters

Florida's hitters will add to their major league lead in strikeouts during a series against the Mets. The Marlins are 4-5 against New York this season, with 89 strikeouts in only 310 at-bats. Middle infielders Hanley Ramirez and Dan Uggla have 28 strikeouts combined in 70 at-bats against Mets pitching.

Wrigley wrecks

St. Louis faces a daunting task in its first visit to Wrigley Field this season. The Cardinals have lost 14 of their past 20 games in the Friendly Confines, and the Cubs expect to have three of their top starting pitchers lined up for the series: righthanders Carlos Zambrano and Ryan Dempster and lefthander Ted Lilly. Zambrano is 9-1 with a 1.68 ERA in his past 14 starts against St. Louis.

August 8-11

Is Papi back?

If Boston DH David Ortiz truly is recovered from his wrist injury, it should show in a series at U.S. Cellular Field. In his past 18 regular-season games against the White Sox, Ortiz has eight homers, 21 RBIs and a .311 batting average. The Red Sox are 13-5 in those games.

August 11-13

Twin killing

If form holds, the Yankees will flex their power during a series at Minnesota. Since opening day 2002, the Yankees are 33-12 against the Twins and have outthundered them, 69-23, in that span. Third baseman Alex Rodriguez has 12 home runs in 115 at-bats against Minnesota since joining the Yankees in 2004.

August 12-14

Lesson learned

Arizona lost six of its final eight games against Colorado last season, and the Rockies rode the momentum to the World Series. The Diamondbacks appear intent on not repeating their mistake. They are 8-1 against Colorado this season and have outscored the Rockies, 63-35. Arizona shortstop Stephen Drew is hitting .457 with an .829 slugging percentage against Colorado in 2008. —Gerry Fraley

SCOUTS VIEWS

Observations and opinions from major league scouts

The Angels didn't need Teixeira—but now that they have him, look out

The Angels were considered the class of the American League even before they acquired slugging first baseman Mark Teixeira from Atlanta.

"They're the model franchise in our league," an A.L. scout says. "I like everything they do. The way they scout. The way they develop. The way they instruct. The way they play."

That scout and a National League scout say manager Mike Scioscia deserves significant credit for the Angels' success. Scioscia has created an atypical A.L. team, one that does not live and die with the home run. A versatile offense and a deep bullpen have allowed the Angels to be a successful road club.

"You can tell [Scioscia] played in the National League," the N.L. scout says. "They put pressure on you. Nobody runs the bases like them. They'll always look to take an extra base. And if they run into a few outs, he is OK with it. He doesn't make those guys play looking over their shoulder."

"For me, his staff took a big hit a few years ago when Joe Maddon went to [manage] Tampa Bay. Maddon was the middleman with the players. But they've got it together again."

The scouts agree that Teixeira makes the middle of the lineup better—but he came at a high price. They like the progress of first baseman Casey Kotchman, who was sent to Atlanta.

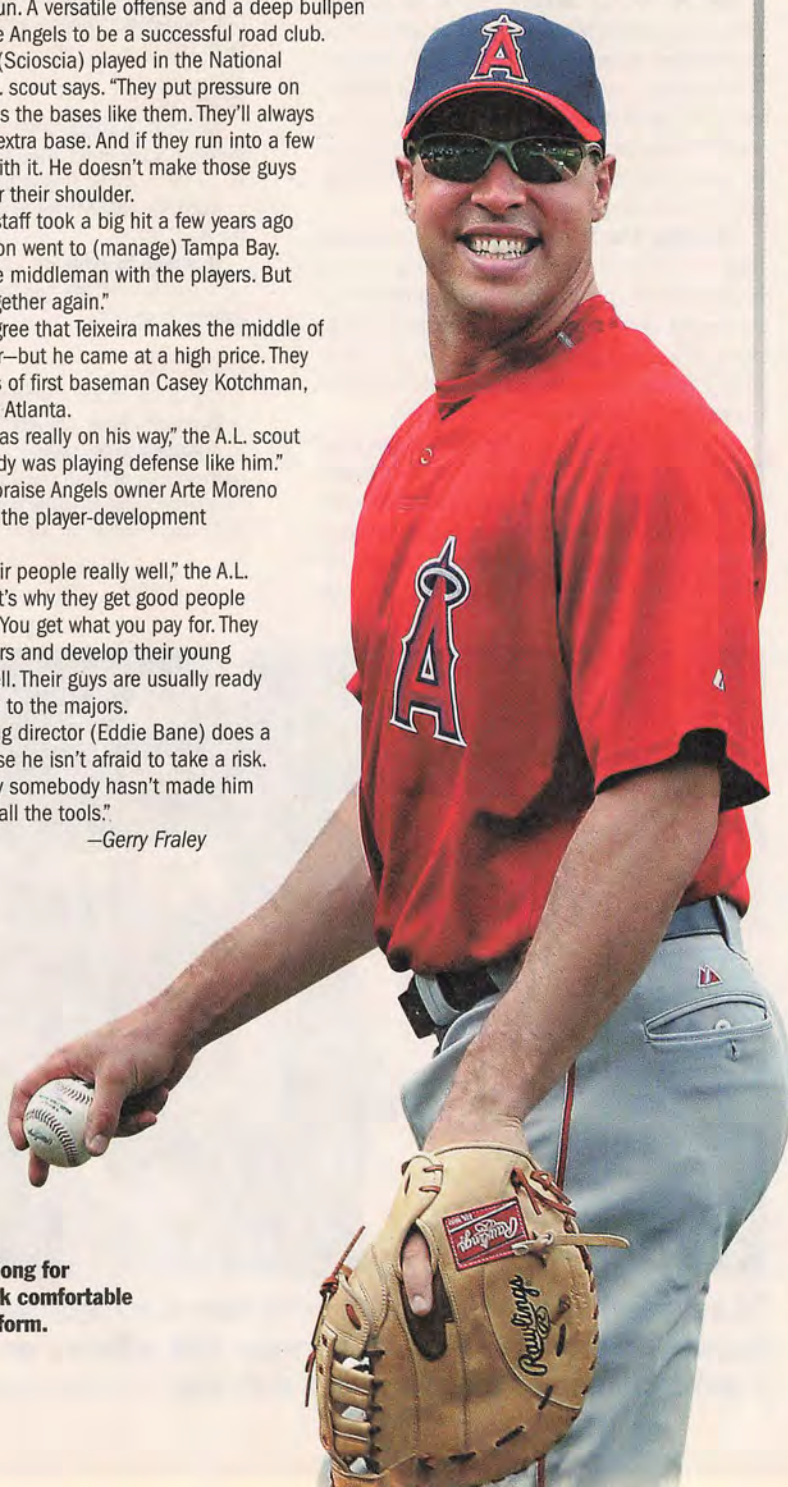
"Kotchman was really on his way," the A.L. scout says. "And nobody was playing defense like him."

Both scouts praise Angels owner Arte Moreno for spending on the player-development operation.

"They pay their people really well," the A.L. scout says. "That's why they get good people and keep them. You get what you pay for. They get good teachers and develop their young players really well. Their guys are usually ready when they come to the majors."

"Their scouting director [Eddie Bane] does a great job because he isn't afraid to take a risk. I don't know why somebody hasn't made him a G.M. He's got all the tools."

—Gerry Fraley



It didn't take long for Teixeira to look comfortable in his new uniform.

TOP5 surprising starters

Sure, there are more than five—we'd list Justin Duchschere if we felt confident in our ability to type his name correctly—but these guys have stat sheets that really inspire a drooling, slack-jawed expression.

1 Cliff Lee, LHP, Indians. Heading into spring training, Lee was more of an afterthought than a rotation option—let alone a Cy Young award candidate. He won 18 games in 2005 but had steadily regressed to the point that he was banished to the minor leagues for much of 2007. Now he ranks among the league leaders in multiple categories.



2 Aaron Cook, RHP, Rockies. Between the bases-loaded jams and Dan Uggla's yips, Cook's three-inning effort in the All-Star Game might have earned him MVP honors—if the N.L. had won. But the fact he was an All-Star is shocking enough. In six seasons with Colorado, Cook had never won more than nine games before racking up 14 so far this season.

3 Joe Saunders, LHP, Angels. If Kelvin Escobar (shoulder) and John Lackey (triceps) had been healthy at the start of the season, there's a good chance Saunders would have begun the year as a reliever—or as a starter at Class AAA. Instead, this All-Star leads the Angels with 14 wins. Coming into 2007, he had only 15 career wins in parts of three seasons with Los Angeles.

4 Mike Mussina, RHP, Yankees. In the spring, there was a legitimate chance/hope that Mussina, 39, would be forced from the rotation to make room for the young trio of Ian Kennedy, Phil Hughes and Joba Chamberlain. Yikes. A reinvented Mussina has been the Yankees' best starting pitcher and now has at least 11 wins in 17 straight seasons.

5 Kyle Lohse, RHP, Cardinals. He was so under the radar that he remained unsigned until mid-March. St. Louis took a one-year flier on Lohse, and it has proved to be one of the best signings of the offseason. Lohse soon will eclipse his career high in wins, and his 3.73 ERA this season is almost a full run lower than his career mark. —Chris Bahr

The Rockies know how to roll

A few things point to another late-season rush, but Colorado has plenty of ground to make up

By Stan McNeal

On June 2, the Rockies were 18 games under .500, 12 games out of first place and saddled with a major league-worst 5.07 team ERA. Not exactly the kind of start you'd expect from the 2007 N.L. champions, huh?

"Well, we didn't feel as hopeless as it might look," Rockies infielder Garrett Atkins says. "We were dealing with some injuries and we weren't playing well, but we knew when healthy we had the personnel. And it helped that nobody in our division was running away."

Two months later, there still is no team running away with the N.L. West, and the Rockies are making a move. They are creeping toward .500 and steadily climbing in a division where .500 makes you a serious contender.

Given the way the Rockies finished last season, making up an eight-game deficit in two months would seem about as doable as finding a cold beer in LoDo. The Rockies, remember, won 14 of their final 15 regular-season games in 2007 and surged from 6½ back in mid-September all the way to the World Series.

That September success still is paying dividends. "It helps a lot. That shows that the guys in here are capable of putting together a streak like that," says Atkins, a .303 hitter who leads the Rockies in RBIs. "Everyone still believes we've got as good a chance as anyone in our division."

This season's turnaround kicked into high gear when the Rockies won nine of their first 10 games after the break. Starting pitching fueled the charge as the bottom of the rotation—Jorge De La Rosa and Ubaldo Jimenez—won five games combined without allowing more than three runs in a start.

Confidence gained during last season's finish is not the only factor that has been playing in the Rockies' favor:

A friendly schedule. Of their 15 remaining series, the only four against out-of-division opponents will be against sub-.500 teams: Atlanta, Houston, Cincinnati and Washington. The Rockies will have plenty of chances to gain ground on the two teams ahead of them in the N.L. West, too. They have nine games left against the Diamondbacks, six against the Dodgers.

"I looked at our schedule before the break and saw it was favorable," Atkins says. "I noticed we already had played all the teams at the top of the other divisions twice, so we were done with them."

When you're playing a lot of teams under .500, obviously that's going to help you."

They're getting healthy. Ace lefthander Jeff Francis (shoulder) was scheduled to return from the disabled list earlier this week. First baseman Todd Helton (back) recently suffered a setback, but there has been no talk of his potentially missing the rest of the season. Although Helton no longer is the doubles machine he once was, his presence remains important to a young lineup.

Shortstop Troy Tulowitzki is back. His season-long funk reached a low point early in July, when he slammed his bat in frustration and needed 16 stitches to close the resulting gash in his right hand. Tulowitzki went 5-for-5 in his first game back, is hitting .457 since the break and has raised his average 71 points since the start of July.

So, have Tulowitzki and the Rockies put their struggles behind them for good? "If the pitching holds up," Padres general manager Kevin Towers says. "Because of their offense, they have the kind of team to put together a good winning streak. We saw that last year."

SN

Toronto and Texas: The killer T's?

Trying to identify teams that could finish this season like the Rockies finished last season is as dicey as trading for Manny Ramirez. At least Texas and Toronto—unlike Colorado—began August with winning records.

Blue Jays

Good: They decided not to deal hard-throwing A.J. Burnett, even though no one can be certain if that's a good thing.

Bad: They have three teams to leapfrog in the A.L. East.

Remains to be seen: If ace Roy Halladay's right arm falls off from all the complete games (seven).

Rangers

Good: They have scored the most runs.

Bad: They have allowed the most runs.

Remains to be seen: If Josh Hamilton makes a run at the Triple Crown, or at least keeps the Rangers in the race with his RBI-a-day production. —Stan McNeal



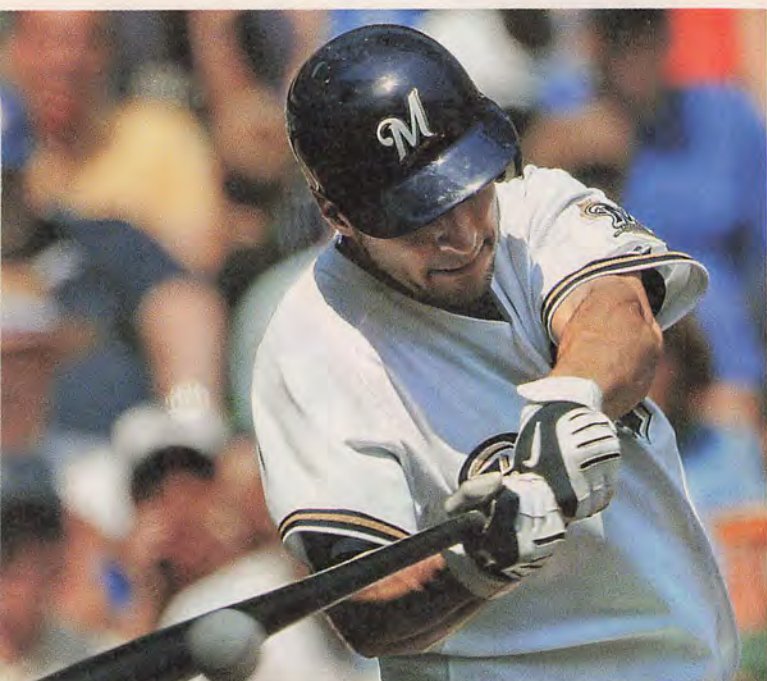
'(Last year) shows that the guys in here are capable of putting together a streak like that. Everyone still believes we've got as good a chance as anyone in our division.' —Garrett Atkins, Rockies infielder

Q&A

Ryan Braun
Brewers LF

'It's not pressure—it's fun'

In late May 2007, Ryan Braun burst onto the major league scene. He wound up hitting 34 homers, driving in 97 runs and winning N.L. rookie of the year honors, and he hasn't slowed down a bit. (He entered the week with 29 homers and 82 RBIs.)



Braun is the one Brewers star who will be in Milwaukee for the long haul.

SN: The Brewers are in a much different situation than last year. You are expected to win rather than being a surprise team. What is the effect of that?

BRAUN: We aren't feeling any pressure, if that's what you mean. Our expectations are that we want to win now. We are as confident as any team in baseball. It's not pressure—it's fun.

SN: You wound up falling two games short of the playoffs last year, but what experience did you gain from going through a pennant race?

BRAUN: The experience of coming to the field and playing meaningful games in September has to benefit us this year. The feel is different. Last year, we got into scoreboard watching a

little too much. This year, we don't care what the Cardinals are doing or the Cubs are doing. That did distract us some last year. We have to focus on what we do and not worry so much about anybody else.

SN: Does adding a pitcher like CC Sabathia increase the pressure?

BRAUN: No, because we already had high expectations for ourselves. We feel like we had a really good team before we got him. We're that much better. For the Milwaukee Brewers to

even be in conversations like that for a pitcher of that caliber is fun, and it's something new for us. Adding him took us from being a good team to a great team.

SN: Your two best pitchers, Ben Sheets and Sabathia, can become free agents at the end of the season. Are you thinking about that?

BRAUN: I don't think anyone is oblivious to it, but it doesn't factor into the equation at all. The focus is on getting to the postseason and then winning in the postseason. If somehow we can re-sign either one, that's great. But our goal is to win this year.



SN: The Brewers signed you to a long-term contract this spring, well before they had to. Other teams have made similar offers to their best young players. What's your take on that?

BRAUN: In my situation, it made sense for both sides. I get security, and the team probably saves money down the road. I know there are lots of different opinions about it, but for me, it made sense. I hope we can do that with some of our other players, too.

—John Rawlings

Tearing up the competition

Last week, the Brewers were swept at home by the division-leading Cubs, but don't blame Braun. He has been at his best against Milwaukee's top N.L. Central rivals this year.

	Games	HRs	RBIs	Avg.
 vs. Cubs	10	2	10	.342
 vs. Cardinals	12	6	11	.481

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Rodgers (left) and Favre have joked about who's No. 1, but the Packers' decision makes the point very seriously.



There's much to dislike about how this long-running saga played out, but in the end, the Packers made a sound business decision.

Favre's return is about star power

By Dennis Dillon

ddillon@sportingnews.com

If you're Martin Scorsese and you have a chance to get Robert De Niro or an unproven actor to star in your next film, which guy do you choose? If you want the film to be an Oscar contender and a boffo box-office hit—and you also want to keep the rest of the cast happy—you go with De Niro.

The Packers face a similar situation now that Brett Favre has come in from the cold and rejoined their roster. And that's why they have changed course in the middle of training camp. They are going from a commitment to Aaron Rodgers as their starting quarterback for the 2008 season to an open competition between Rodgers and Favre.

"When it's opening day, you want your best guys on the field," says a scout from another NFC

North team. "You can say whatever you want until it's time to play. But when those victories mean everything, especially opening day against a division opponent on *Monday Night Football*, the stakes are too high."

You can pontificate all you want about how this decision reflects badly on the Packers' promise to Rodgers. You can argue that Rodgers is having the rug pulled out from under him. You can say coach Mike McCarthy is sending mixed messages to his players.

But remember this: Professional football is a business first and foremost. And by welcoming Favre back to their roster and giving him a chance to regain his starting job—the one he has held for the past 275 consecutive games, including the playoffs—the Packers made a sound business decision.

The Packers tried to trade Favre, to no avail.

They weren't going to simply release him and allow him to sign with another team, such as the division rival Vikings. And their attempt to make him a team ambassador with a 10-year, \$25 million marketing deal was deliberated over by Favre but then turned down.

In the end, the Packers made the best decision. If Favre was going to play again, he was going to play for them. And he'll probably play as their starter.

"Everybody knows he was the runner-up MVP last year," says the scout. "If you're talking about trying to win the whole thing and the best player on your team is a backup, you've got issues."

Favre, who will turn 39 in October, had one of his best seasons in 2007, when he led Green Bay to the NFC championship game. He completed 356 of 535 passes (a career-high 66.5 percent) for 4,155 yards and 28 touchdowns, with

15 interceptions.

"He played better last year than he probably played in five years," the scout says. "Even if he lost a little bit of arm strength, that means he goes from having a superstrong arm to having a strong arm. There's probably only six guys in the league who can throw it as far as he can."

Assuming Favre wins the quarterback derby—rookie Brian Brohm and Matt Flynn won't be in the competition for the starting role—Rodgers will be a backup for a fourth consecutive season. The team's first-round draft pick in 2005, Rodgers, 24, has played in only seven regular-season games and thrown 59 passes. His most extensive action came in a loss to Dallas last season, after Favre left the game with an injury, when Rodgers completed 18 of 26 passes for 201 yards and a touchdown.

Even the Packers don't know what they have in Rodgers, who has played a lot in preseason games but generally against defenses that don't show a lot of different coverages or exotic blitzes.

"I think he's a good athlete and has good mobility," an NFC South scout says of Rodgers. "He's an accurate quarterback on short to midrange throws. But he's still a young quarterback and is going to have his ups and downs and make mistakes."

Who gives the Packers a better chance of winning—a future Hall of Famer who can still play at a high level or a player who has never started a game in the NFL? In the end, the Packers were forced to make this decision. But it was the right decision.

Bringing in Favre as the backup would have been like casting De Niro in a cameo role. **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

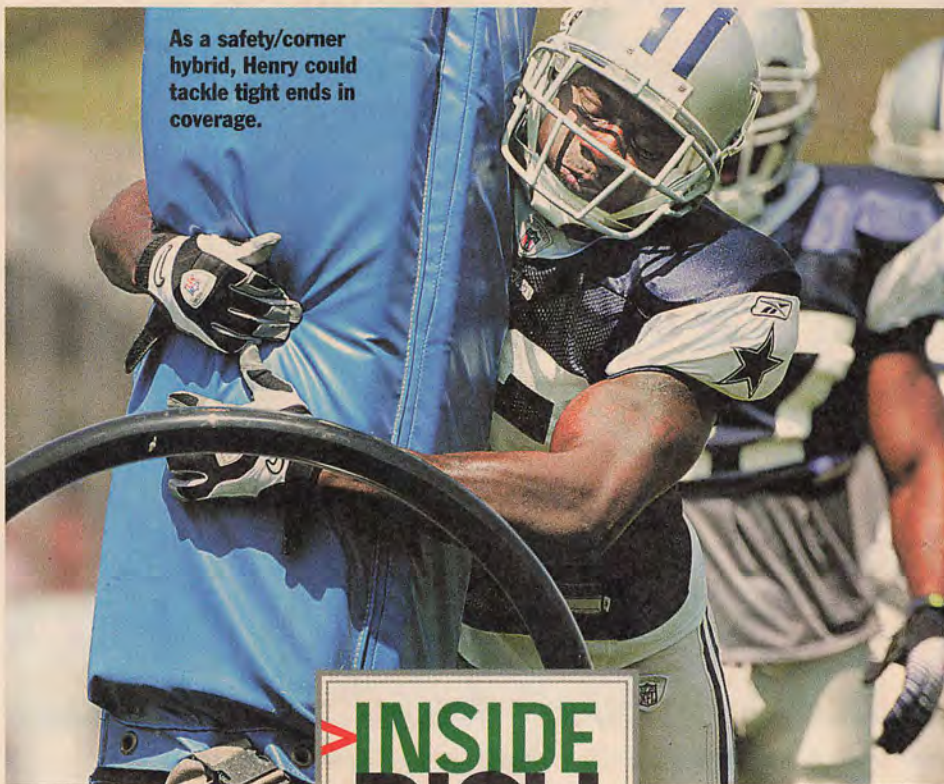
Our experts will report live from training camps—they'll visit the 49ers, Cowboys, Chargers, Bucs, Saints, Jags and Falcons and any others they can squeeze in—at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Now that Ryan Grant has ended his contract impasse and returned to the Packers, he'll reclaim his job as the starting running back. But don't be surprised if second-year back Brandon Jackson makes as big a contribution in the offense as rookie Ahmad Bradshaw did last season for the Giants.

Steve Smith is one of the most exciting players in the NFL, but he needs to go back to anger management counseling or find help from a higher source. Football is a physical sport and fuses do become short during training camp, but what he did to Ken Lucas bordered on criminal assault.

As a safety/corner hybrid, Henry could tackle tight ends in coverage.



INSIDE DISH

The Cowboys' depth at cornerback creates an interesting situation for veteran **Anthony Henry**. He's still No. 1 on the right side,

where he has started the past three seasons, but coaches have tinkered with creating a hybrid cornerback/safety position for him in the team's substitution packages. The thinking is that the 6-1, 208-pound Henry can cover athletic tight ends and negate some of the matchup problems **S Roy Williams** has had in the past. ➤ Bucs CB **Phillip Buchanon** appears to be improving under the tutelage of defensive backs coach **Raheem Morris**. Buchanon has great quickness and is showing signs of adapting to Tampa Bay's system in his second year with the team. After CB **Brian Kelly** was lost to the Lions in free agency during the offseason, the Bucs signed former Patriots DB **Eugene Wilson** and drafted **Aqib Talib** in the first round. Buchanon could wind up holding off the challenges of both. ➤ QB **Joe Flacco** might not beat out **Kyle Boller** and **Troy Smith** for the Ravens' starting job this season, but the rookie out of Division I-AA Delaware has grasped Baltimore's system quickly. On the second day of camp, Flacco was calling audibles during a 9-on-9 drill. ➤ Chargers second-year TE **Scott Chandler**, who was inactive for all but one game as a rookie last year, is getting a lot of reps with the first-team offense alongside **Brandon Manumaleuna** while **Antonio Gates** continues to recover from a lingering toe injury. Chan-

dlar uses his 6-7 frame and long arms to his advantage in jump-ball situations. Plus, he is playing on special teams, which he did

not do as a rookie. ➤ The Packers are expecting second-year pro **Aaron Rouse** to be a key special teams contributor and compete for a starting spot at safety. Rouse has good speed and is physical. At 6-4, 223, he could be a force as the eighth man in the box and create matchup problems for opponents in coverage. Rouse had limited opportunities as a rookie last season, but he took advantage of them. During a three-game stretch when he started in place of injured FS **Nick Collins**, he intercepted two passes. ➤ Raiders DT **Tommy Kelly**, signed to a seven-year, \$50.5 million contract in March, still is a ways from being in shape. But that doesn't necessarily mean he needs to lose weight. Coming off knee surgery, Kelly's stamina is far more important, and the coaching staff believes he can be effective playing at 330 pounds—30 more than he was listed at last season. ➤ The abolition of the force-out rule—receivers now must get both feet down in bounds or passes will be ruled incomplete—probably won't change offensive players' technique. But it should affect how defensive coaches teach their players to defend the perimeter. Defenders now are more likely to be instructed to go for the receiver's body rather than the ball along the sideline to get a sure completion.



Royal has impressed the Broncos with a combination of soft hands, smarts and speed.

BALTIMORE RB Ray Rice has impressed the coaches and will push Willis McGahee for playing time. Rice has good acceleration and the ability to find holes, even in traffic. He also has shown strong cut-back skills.

BUFFALO The Bills like WR James Hardy's ability to catch passes over smaller defensive backs, but he still needs work on reading coverages, running routes and blocking. The 6-5 Hardy has good speed and could get early playing time as a red zone target.

CINCINNATI WR Andre Caldwell's toughness is as impressive as his speed. He has the quickness to release off the line and the speed to gain separation. He's also a physical blocker with the versatility to play wide or in the slot. With experience, he should become T.J. Houshmandzadeh's backup.

CLEVELAND The Browns think TE Martin Rucker (6-4, 260) might be a fourth-round steal. He's big, fast, an outstanding receiver and a deep threat down the seam. The team might even consider lining up Rucker inside and using TE Kellen Winslow in the slot.

DENVER The Broncos are happy with the work ethic and skill level of WR Eddie Royal, who has good speed and soft hands and runs precise routes. He is practicing in the slot behind Brandon Stokley, but the team needs to see if he can play outside, too.

HOUSTON CB Antwaun Molden (6-2, 195) is more technically sound than coaches expected

and has the look of a playmaker. He also has the long arms and big frame coaches like. Molden has picked up the system quickly and could be in the mix for playing time, if not a starting job.

INDIANAPOLIS G Mike Pollak is getting a good deal of repetitions with the No. 1 unit and enhancing his bid to win a starting job. Pollak is athletic and has picked up the offense very quickly. Either Pollak or Charlie Johnson will be asked to replace Jake Scott on the right side.

JACKSONVILLE DE Quentin Groves has made an impression on the coaching staff with his quick burst off the line, explosiveness and intensity on special teams. Groves, by far the club's speediest pass rusher, must improve his hand technique, which will enable him to shed blockers more quickly and consistently.

KANSAS CITY The Chiefs will plug CB Brandon Flowers into their starting lineup. He's an aggressive player who, despite his 5-9, 187-pound frame, doesn't back down from bigger, stronger receivers. Flowers doesn't have great speed but is quick and has a knack for making plays.

MIAMI For three days, sixth-round pick Donald Thomas ran with the first-team offense at right guard. Thomas has great size (6-4, 303) and has made a quick transition to the NFL. The length of

CAMPING

AFC

his stay at or near the top of the depth chart will be determined by how he handles the speed of pre-season games.

NEW ENGLAND ILB Jerod Mayo has worked extensively in the sub packages and appears to be picking up both the physical and mental demands of his position. Mayo, a self-described film freak, doesn't look lost making defensive calls, and his speed has been eye-opening.

NEW YORK According to Jets coach Eric Mangini, No. 6 overall pick Vernon Gholston has been "swimming" early in camp. His biggest problem has been adjusting from being a down lineman (at Ohio State) to a standup linebacker. Gholston has shown flashes of pass-rushing ability, but it's obvious that missing spring workouts set him back.

OAKLAND RB Darren McFadden is everything the Raiders envisioned when they drafted him fourth overall. He's fast, elusive, versatile and capable of changing the complexion of a game. McFadden also is versatile enough to work as a receiver and kick returner. The Raiders intend to use him immediately as a change-of-pace complement to starting RB Justin Fargas.

PITTSBURGH RB Rashard Mendenhall is off to a slow start, maybe because there is so much attention focused on him. Mendenhall has been tentative, failing to show the slashing style and power that made the Steelers take him with the 23rd pick. He's also working as a kick returner, a role he did not play in college.

SAN DIEGO FB Jacob Hester has shown ability as a runner, and he also can catch the ball. Partly depending on the health of FB Andrew Pinnock (knee), Hester is likely to play the majority of snaps this season.

TENNESSEE Coach Jeff Fisher calls Chris Johnson the fastest running back he has ever coached. Johnson has lined up in the backfield and at receiver, though he will play most at running back. Johnson (5-11, 200) has great elusiveness and star quality—if he doesn't wear down.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

OUT: Rookie buzz

NFC

ARIZONA RB Tim Hightower has good quickness and agility, which makes him effective between the tackles. Edgerrin James will still get the majority of the carries, but Hightower could get more touches as the season progresses.

ATLANTA QB Matt Ryan has been a quick study—he is learning the offense and gaining command of the huddle. Coaches say there's no timetable to name a starter, but if Chris Redman can't separate himself from Ryan, expect the rookie to be on the field for the opener against the Lions. The Falcons will take pressure off Ryan by relying heavily on their rushing attack.

CAROLINA LB Dan Connor isn't playing poorly; he's just stuck in traffic. The Panthers have established starters and backups at his two spots (strongside and middle linebacker), which doesn't leave much playing time for Connor. The team believes he'll be an integral part of its special teams units until he's ready to step into a larger role.

CHICAGO The team's vision for rebuilding the offensive line is on hold because first-round pick Chris Williams was shelved with a mysterious back injury. Soon the Bears will have to consider moving LT John St. Clair to the right side and sliding John Tait back to his old spot on the left.

DALLAS RB Tashard Choice is attacking holes instead of trying to bounce everything to the outside. The Cowboys think he's a tough runner capable of carrying a full load if Marion Barber can't for a week or two.

DETROIT RB Kevin Smith has excellent vision and cutting ability and is expected to unseat veteran Tatum Bell as the starter by the end of camp. Smith also is ahead of the rookie curve on things like catching the ball out of the backfield and identifying and blocking blitzing linebackers.

GREEN BAY CB Patrick Lee has natural man-to-man skills and seems to know when to break on balls to the sideline. He must improve in the open field, where he's vulnerable to double moves and hard cuts. Lee looks polished, but he has to show he can consistently play press coverage and understand the team's coverage concepts.

MINNESOTA C John Sullivan is backing up veteran Matt Birk, whose future with the team is

uncertain because he's in the final year of his contract. Sullivan is a tough, smart player who has some athleticism and versatility. He also is getting snaps at right guard. Sullivan says he feels comfortable in the Vikings' zone-blocking scheme, having played it at Notre Dame.

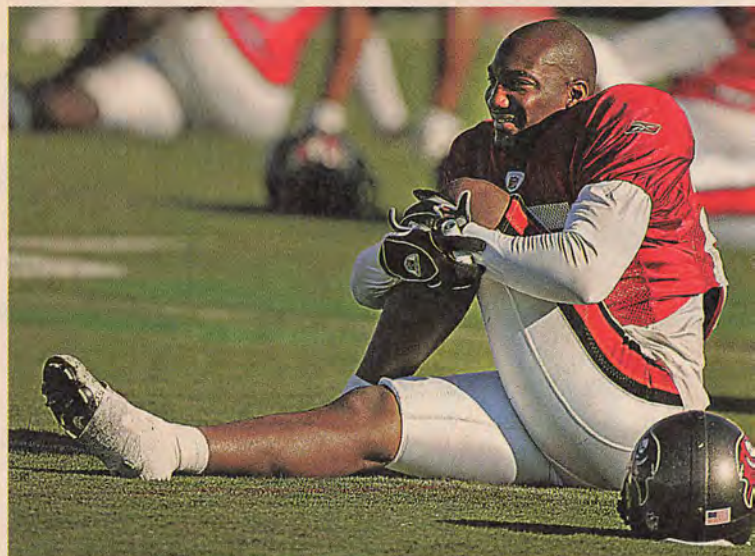
NEW ORLEANS Carl Nicks is lining up at both left guard and left tackle but has stood out at tackle. He has held his own against pass rushers Bobby McCray and Will Smith. Nicks could challenge Jamar Nesbit for the starting left guard job, but chances are he'll enter this season as a backup.

NEW YORK CB Terrell Thomas has had no trouble sticking with receivers in team and 7-on-7 drills. He has the strength to use his hands at the line and the footwork to run with receivers. His nose for the ball has pleased the staff.

PHILADELPHIA WR DeSean Jackson (hamstring) missed almost all of minicamp and the first two days of contact practice in training camp. One positive is that coaches say Jackson is a quick learner, which is an important trait because rookie receivers typically struggle to get comfortable in the team's West Coast offense.

ST. LOUIS DE Chris Long, the No. 2 overall pick, looks very much like a rookie. He has some good moments and some bad moments. Line coach Brian Baker is constantly in Long's ear, telling him to get lined up properly, get upfield and stay strong in pursuit.

SAN FRANCISCO At 290 pounds, C Cody Wallace is small for a 49ers lineman, and his lack of bulk showed early. He was susceptible to bull rushes, spending a lot of early blocking drills on his back. Wallace's technique, however, is improv-



It's no stretch to say Talib's size, speed and playmaking ability already have made a big impression on Bucs coaches.

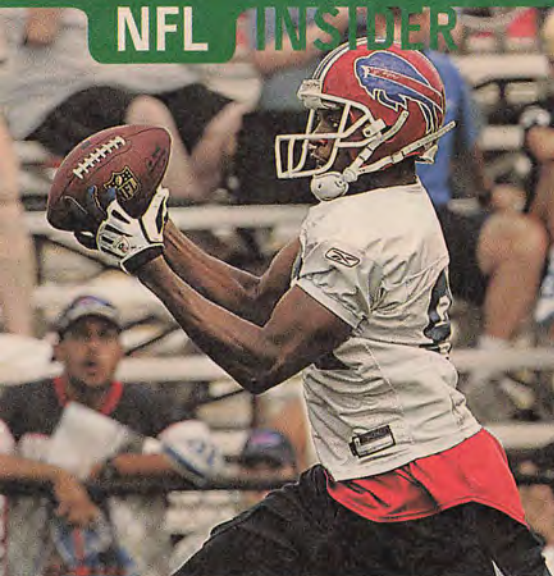
ing, and he is starting to win some of the battles he was losing handily early on.

SEATTLE DT Red Bryant (6-4, 318) has displayed enough quickness and strength to be a disruptive force inside. Bryant carries much of his weight above the waist, so he will have to work on staying low so linemen can't ride him out of plays. Before they can do that, though, they have to get their hands on him, which has been a challenge so far.

TAMPA BAY It didn't take long for CB Aqib Talib (6-1, 202) to prove he's a playmaker. He had two interceptions in an 11-on-11 drill early in camp and continues to impress the coaches with how quickly he has picked up the team's system. Talib's size and strength also are big assets. He already has shown a penchant for wresting the ball from big receivers. His biggest challenge will be improving as a tackler in space.

WASHINGTON LG/LT Chad Rinehart has shown good footwork, toughness and durability. He has a lot to work on, such as developing his hand punch and learning plays, but he's showing potential. The team is working him only on the left side, so he won't have to worry about moving back and forth.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Rick Alonzo; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Matt Barrows; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



Get yourself free, Lee

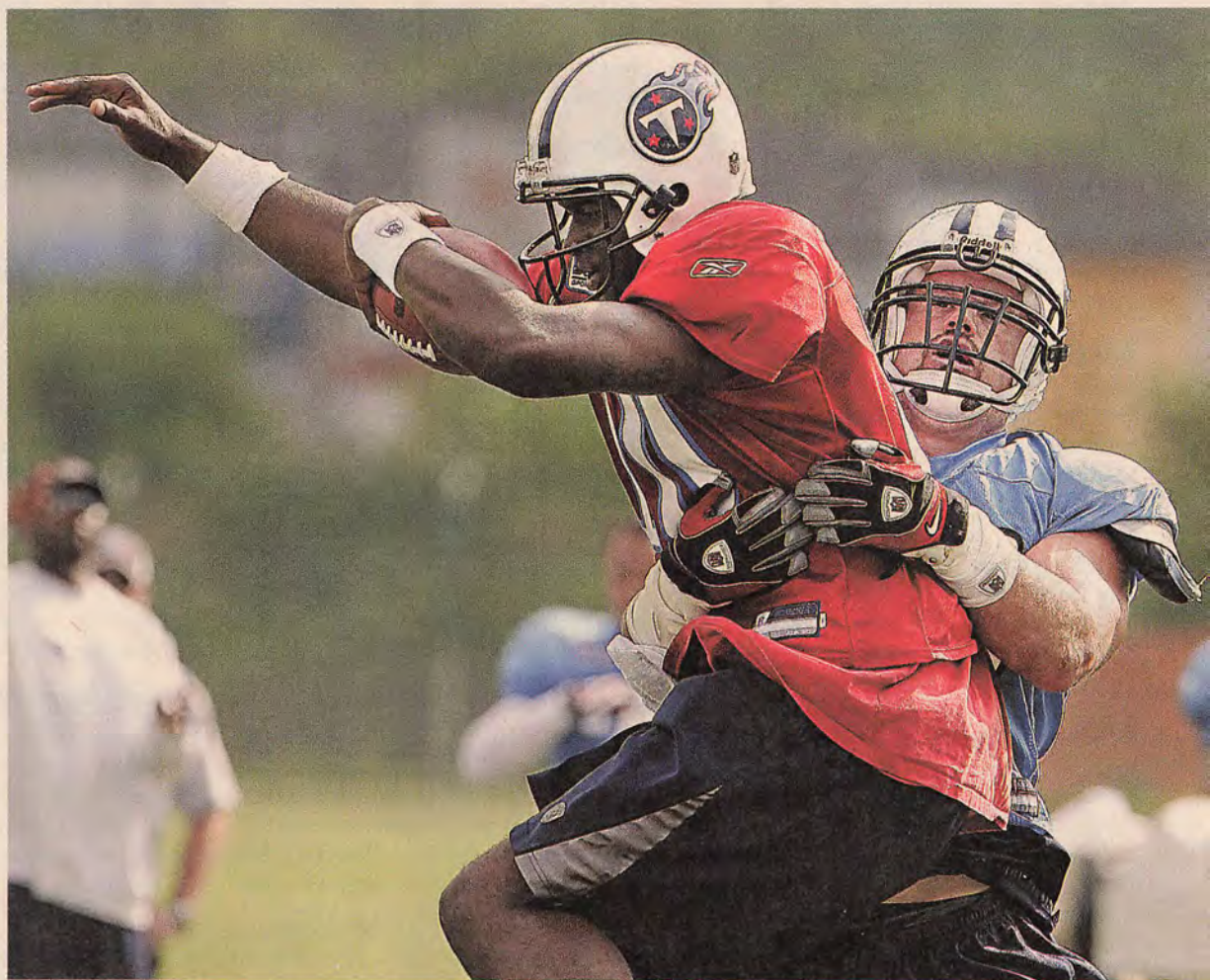
Bills wide receiver **Lee Evans** has been virtually unstoppable during training camp, thanks in part to a new philosophy on offense. Known primarily as a vertical threat, Evans was easier to cover last season because teams knew where he would line up and what routes he would run. But new coordinator Turk Schonert intends to make it harder for teams to roll extra coverage toward Evans by making him a moving target. Look for more presnap motion and alignments that keep defenses guessing. Schonert also will send Evans on more crossing routes, which will allow him to get the ball quickly and use his ability to run after the catch.

Focus on: Playbook updates

The Cowboys didn't swing a deal for a top-line receiver to complement **Terrell Owens**, so they're focusing on throwing more to their running backs and tight ends. They really want to get the ball to RBs **Felix Jones** and **Marion Barber** in one-on-one situations and give them the opportunity to make big plays. Barber has good hands; Jones, a rookie, had only 39 receptions in college but has done a good job of catching the ball in camp. Now Jones must prove he can handle blitz pickups as well. ... Titans QB **Vince Young** has never turned down an opportunity to run the ball. Instead of discouraging such boldness, new offensive coordinator **Mike Heimerdinger** has designed a set that gives Young a running start on some pass/run options. One sprint-out play has Young getting to the outside, heading toward the line at full speed and then delivering the ball to a receiver. His sprint-out throws have been mostly accurate. If the receiver is covered, Young has the option to take off. ... With No. 1 WR **Brandon Marshall** facing a possible suspension, there doesn't figure to be much of a wow

factor in the Broncos' passing game. Lacking a deep threat, the team figures to use a dink-and-dunk approach that relies on gaining yards after the catch. The offense will feature timing routes, as well as dump-off passes and screens designed to get the ball to RBs **Selvin Young**, **Michael Pittman** and **Andre Hall**, all of whom operate well in the open field. The coaches have worked with QB Jay

Cutler on making the safe play and limiting his mistakes. ... Eagles coordinator **Jim Johnson** is installing more 3-4 looks. He's not going exclusively to the 3-4 or crafting an entirely new scheme, but he wants to take advantage of a nice group of pass-rushing linebackers and 'tweeners. DE **Chris Clemons**, SLB **Chris Gocong** and DL **Darren Howard** are versatile. DT **Mike Patterson**, a good run stuffer, also is a strong enough rush option to play end in the 3-4. The idea is to keep the quarterback guessing. In some sets, Gocong might station himself at end just before the snap, giving the quarterback another pass rusher to worry about. ... The Ravens still don't have a big go-to wide receiver, so look for them to throw often to TE **Todd Heap**. He has great size (6-5, 250) and speed for the position, and the Ravens believe he can become a deep threat. They plan to line him up all over the field, hoping to get mismatches with safeties and No. 3 corners. They also will put Heap in motion. If he stays healthy, and if the offensive line can pass-protect, Heap could add a dimension to the offense. ... The Saints, trying to become more disruptive up front, have added athleticism with rookie DT **Sedrick Ellis**, DE **Bobby**



The Titans will let Young run but will need to be sure opponents don't get to him like teammate Kyle Vanden Bosch did.

McCray and MLB **Jonathan Vilma**. And they are working on some creative pressure packages. The most compelling new wrinkle is an alignment that moves DE **Charles Grant** inside to tackle with McCray, a pass-rushing specialist, at end. Ideally, Ellis would play the other tackle spot and **Will Smith** the other end position, giving the Saints a dynamic pressure lineup. Grant has lost a lot of weight—he had been 300 pounds but has dropped into the 280s—after suffering through a disappointing 2007 season; he has the size-power-athleticism combination to be an effective inside rusher.



A return to power

Midway through last season, the Cardinals adjusted their running game. They started running far fewer power plays and went to more of a zone scheme, which better fit the skills of the line and running back Edgerrin James. This season, coaches want to incorporate some elements of that power scheme back into the offense. They think guards Reggie Wells and **Deuce Lutui** have the mobility to pull, so traps and counters should be effective plays. But the running game still will predominantly use zone blocking. James is at his best when he has the freedom to pick his holes rather than have the hole dictated by the scheme.

Scheming for success

Knowing they'll face a lot of multiple-receiver sets, the Chargers are focusing much of their energy on defensive substitution packages. They also have been practicing a seldom-used defense in which cornerback **Antonio Cromartie** lines up at safety against three-receiver sets. So far in camp, the secondary has been dominant in all the packages, as well as in the base scheme. Clearly more confident in the philosophy, the defensive backs are flying to the ball.



Following a new leader

When the 49ers ran the ball last season, there was no doubt which way they were heading—straight ahead. This season, coordinator Mike Martz still plans to send **Frank Gore** between the tackles, but he also is adding more off-tackle runs and sweeps to the outside. The change in Gore's lead blocker illustrates this more aggressive philosophy. Last year, Gore followed Moran Norris, a 250-pound fullback who is best as a bulldozing, straight-ahead blocker. So far in camp, Zak Keasey—who's 15 pounds lighter than Norris—is getting all the first-team repetitions. Keasey moves better through traffic to make blocks downfield; he's also fast enough to stay ahead of Gore on sweeps and outside runs.

Worlds left to conquer

The 2007 Patriots may have looked near-perfect to the naked eye, but young coordinator Josh McDaniels knows better. That's why he's still in New England.
By Albert Breer

On the field, his team was 16-0 and his offense had just finished a historically prolific season with an NFL-record 589 points. Away from the game, he had a wife and two young children, all happy and settled in New England. For a guy 3½ months short of his 32nd birthday, Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels had a pretty good hold on life.

It was inevitable that other NFL teams would call, looking for a new coach. And indeed there were inquiries from the Ravens and Falcons; both took a hard look at making McDaniels the second-youngest head coach in league history. (Lane Kiffin was 31 when the Raiders hired him in 2007.)

There's an army of assistant coaches who would travel down the Eastern Seaboard on foot for such an opportunity. Not McDaniels. Nope, he didn't even kick the tires and take interviews. And get this—he really wasn't that conflicted.

"At that point in time, no," he says. "Because we were right there, at the beginning of the playoffs, and that's such an important time to spend on that season. I said it then—it was a simple decision at that time. The best thing was to commit to our preparation."

Seven months later, that's where McDaniels is again. Preparing—and trying to find ways to help the NFL's best offense improve.

Most people would look strictly at the lure of being a head coach at the highest level—there are only 32 of those jobs—but McDaniels weighed the situation and chose to remain on a team that was accomplishing things never seen in the NFL. Similarly, where most people see the juggernaut he

A line from his resume ...

In 2007, Josh McDaniels presided over the NFL's most prolific offense—maybe the best ever. Tom Brady set an all-time record with 50 TD passes, and Randy Moss caught a record 23 touchdowns. The offense as a whole set or challenged several marks, as well. —Albert Breer

	2007	All-time rank
Points	589	1st
Touchdowns	75	1st
Points/game	36.8	2nd
Players w/TDs	21	T-1st
First downs	393	2nd
Passing TDs	50	2nd

presided over in 2007, he sees flaws.

He points to an offense that sagged in three "weather games" last year and emphasizes that not being able to handle inclement conditions is troublesome for a team that plays in the upper right-hand corner of the country. He talks about how his team had 18 false-start penalties at home and five on the road.

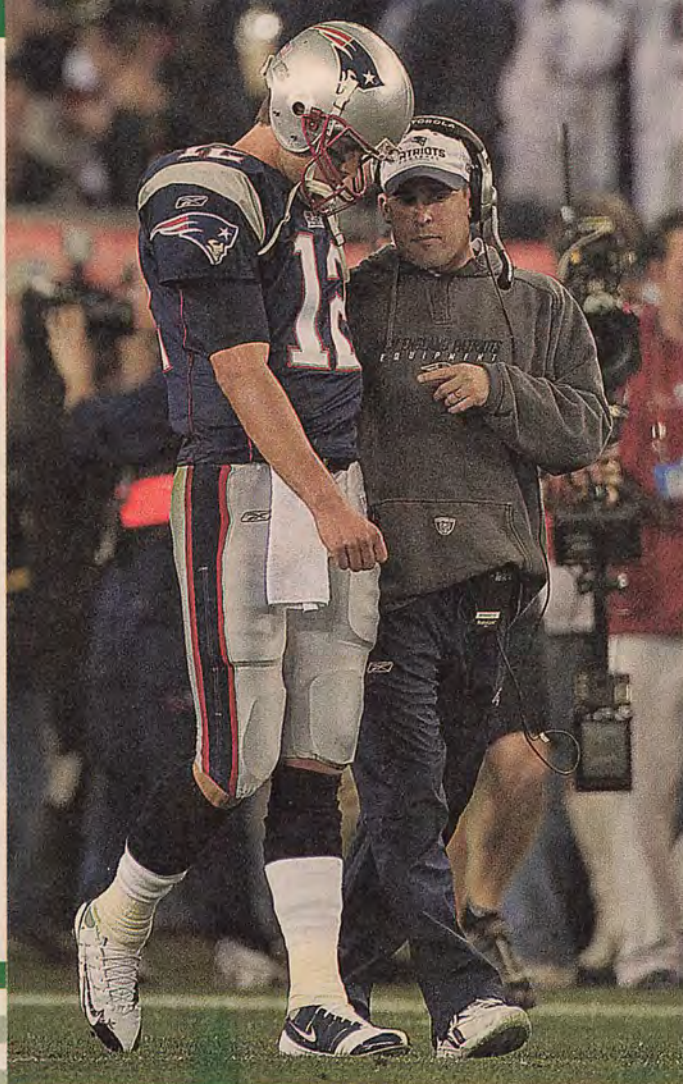
He says that although the Pats' overall third-down numbers were good, they weren't consistent enough. He laments drive-killing negative running plays in the red zone.

And then, the things the Patriots do well already—McDaniels says they can do better.

"When I say (improve), I'm not just talking about points," he says. "I'm talking about our level of play in situational football, our handling of adversity, adjusting and adapting. Those are things we're focused on."

Three of the team's top four receivers return in 2008, and the rest of the offense has undergone only minor tweaking. Instead of introducing players to the system, McDaniels now spends more time adapting the system to players.

His responsibilities include coaching quarter-



McDaniels says he and Brady see things similarly, and that makes sense—they're about the same age.

back Tom Brady—"he and I see things very, very similarly"—and running the entire offense. So, in his mind, there's room to grow, as a play-caller, game-planner, practice coach and quarterback guru. But to those around him, he already has come pretty far.

"He's been very well-schooled in the fundamentals and the X's and O's of football," his boss, Bill Belichick, said at the Super Bowl. "He's been in personnel, he's been on defense, he's been on offense, he's been around football all of his life, so I think he's a guy that has a lot of experiences and I'd say he has a good perspective on the game."

McDaniels also has trust in his ability, enough that he turned down the coaching opportunities, knowing that others would come. The timing wasn't right, with so much at stake. And after talking to his father, a longtime high school coach in Ohio, McDaniels came to the determination that he'll know when the right opportunity comes along.

Maybe that'll be in 2009. Maybe it'll be in 2010. For now, McDaniels is thinking just as he was in January—about how great things in front of him are.

SN

Many non-BCS administrators have dreams of playing ball with the big boys. But their challenge now is as much about the cost of travel as recruiting.

Think you spend a lot on gas?

By Dave Curtis

dcurtis@sportingnews.com

The athletic administrators at Hawaii have spent decades figuring out how to travel cheap. Every trip is trans-Pacific for the Warriors, which makes getting to and from road games second only to recruiting as the school's top sports challenge.

In these difficult economic times, travel has become even more of an issue. Recent jumps in fuel prices, teamed with local carrier Aloha Airlines' declaring bankruptcy in March, have wreaked havoc on Hawaii's budget. The school will spend close to \$3.2 million on travel this coming school year, an increase of more than \$450,000 over its non-Sugar Bowl expenses from last year.

"We're scrambling," says Carl Clapp, associate athletic director for administrative services. "It's getting very difficult for us because, like a lot of others, we're not in the best economy. And ours might be a little worse."

Hawaii isn't the only school that needs to juggle numbers to make all its trips this year. Bowling Green officials will spend about \$183,000 just to show up for September football games at Boise State and Wyoming. Cincinnati's football and volleyball teams will make trips to Hawaii before New Year's Day. Fresno State will fly more than 2,300 miles (each way) twice to face Rutgers and Toledo.

In the short term, creative budgeting and more aggressive fundraising can counter the rising costs. But continued economic issues could shake up how some smaller Division I schools play sports. Bowling Green's Jim Elsasser, assistant athletic director for internal affairs, says his women's golf team plans to save dollars by slashing a tournament from its annual March trip to warmer weather. And WAC commissioner Karl Benson, whose nine-team league has the nation's largest geographic footprint even without Hawaii, says the higher costs might prompt his schools' presi-

dents to look harder at expanding.

"It's going to have to become a topic of conversation," he says. "If we go to a 10-team basketball league and pick the right school, we can have travel partners and eliminate some of those single-game trips from Louisiana Tech to, say, Boise."

The drastic moves remain speculation for most schools and conferences except Hawaii, which has seen travel cost increases take an extra 1 percent of its 2008-09 budget. To help cover expenses, the football team will reach road games by flying commercial from Honolulu to California, then pick up a charter to cover the mainland portion of the journey. UH last resorted to that tactic when it faced Alabama in the 2006 opener; it will happen six times this year, including for the season opener at Florida. (The rest of Hawaii's teams always fly commercial.)

But the new setup doesn't solve all the problems. A round-trip ticket to California, once valued between \$450 and \$485, now costs more than \$700, Clapp says. Continued increases could lead the Warriors to further measures, such as reducing the size of travel parties or following Bowling Green's lead of cutting scheduled non-conference trips.

"We don't want to do anything to hurt our teams' abilities to compete and chances to win," Clapp says. "At the same time, we have to evaluate everything. It's all on the table."

The crunch, of course, has hit most handi-



Recent jumps in fuel prices, teamed with local carrier Aloha Airlines' declaring bankruptcy, have wreaked havoc on Hawaii's budget.

capped schools outside the six BCS conferences. It's no sweat for Ohio State to pack its band, cheerleaders, administration and football team and ship them to California for a game against USC in September. But such a trip for neighbors Toledo and Bowling Green, which reap far less from college football's postseason payouts, puts a much bigger dent in the bottom line.

And that logic follows all around the country. LSU can overcome hurdles Louisiana Tech can't. Tennessee can make trips that would financially cripple Middle Tennessee State. And the more costs rise, the more stark those realities become.

"Our budgets don't grow at the same rate as those other schools," Bowling Green's Elsasser says. "There's a widening gap between the BCS schools and everybody else, and it's going to continue to increase."

The travel costs hurt in other areas, too, from funding official visits to paying for coaches to visit high schools and camps to recruit. And it's not just flying that punishes wallets; coaches are turning in far more expensive rental car, meal and lodging receipts than they were five years ago.

Like in every other pocket of society, the hope is that things change soon and that college athletics travel becomes a bit more affordable. Until then, the small schools around the country will keep rolling their pennies, topping off their tanks and scrounging for more money to get to the stadium and back.

SN

INSIDE DISH

Florida State administrators could help keep **S Myron Rolle** out of the NFL for an extra year—or two. FSU plans to nominate Rolle for a Rhodes Scholarship based on his football skills, academic work and community service. Rolle, who spent a week this summer teaching youth from the Seminole tribe about health issues, might have to choose between NFL money and University of Oxford opportunities after the 2008 season. ➤ A group of Indianapolis businessmen has investigated bringing regular-season college football games to Lucas Oil Stadium, which will replace the RCA Dome as the Colts' home this fall. But the group is much more likely to land a postseason game for the new digs—a plan Big Ten commissioner **Jim Delany** said he would support. Last year, 10 Big Ten teams became bowl-eligible, but Iowa and Northwestern, both 6-6, stayed home because there were not enough openings. ➤ An interesting byproduct of the spread offense's proliferation: The I-formation has become a novelty. Teams such as Georgia, Michigan State and Pittsburgh have become anomalies, forcing opposing defenses to change up when they play them. "Five years ago, when the spread started coming in our league, you needed preparation vs. those teams," says Wisconsin coach **Bret Bielema**, whose team runs more conventional sets. "For us, now, Wisconsin is unique." ➤ Central Michigan officials spent \$50,000 to buy a 30-by-60-foot billboard of junior QB **Dan LeFevour**. The fringe Heisman Trophy candidate's image will appear on the back of the main scoreboard at Detroit's Comerica Park and remain there until April. Now LeFevour needs to follow in the footsteps of another famous billboard boy, former Oregon QB **Joey Harrington**, who placed fourth in the Heisman voting in 2001 after his image graced a 10-story Times Square sign. ➤ Florida's **Aaron Murray** and California's **Richard Brehaut** emerged as the best players at July's Elite 11 Quarterbacks Camp for high school seniors. Murray was named MVP of the camp and could eventually

Rolle has more going for him than a future in the NFL.



follow **Matthew Stafford**, also an Elite MVP, as the starter at Georgia. Brehaut won the points challenge over the four-day camp and impressed the counselors. He is bound for UCLA next fall to play under star-making offensive coordinator **Norm Chow**. ➤ Because Florida and LSU have won national championships the past two seasons using two-quarterback systems—**Tim Tebow** and **Ryan Perrilloux** came in as change-of-pace quarterbacks—more teams are trying the tactic. And that means preseason quarterback battles just aren't as exciting. Take Miami, where redshirt freshman **Robert Marve** and true freshman **Jacory Harris** are dueling for the job. Marve, a dropback passer, figures to win the No. 1 role. But Harris should get snaps, too. "Whichever quarterback we name," coach **Randy Shannon** says, "we're going to play the other one."

speedreads

South Carolina coach Steve Spurrier claims he'll surrender primary play-calling duties to his son, Steve Jr. But bank on the Ol' Ball Coach being in charge of the offense in big spots. No way he's a spectator during a potential game-winning drive against Georgia.

Freshman phenom Terrelle Pryor will play right away for Ohio State, even more so in early games at USC and Wisconsin. Coach Jim Tressel called him "a guy you're going to take notice of." Yeah, you and defensive coordinators nationwide.

Need a sleeper for a BCS bowl? How about North Carolina? The Heels draw a great schedule in a weak Coastal Division of a weaker ACC. The league's new heavyweight will get by Virginia Tech at home in September and end up playing for the ACC crown in Tampa.



By next week, all 120 NCAA Division I-A football teams will be in camp. Our experts will be at some of them, and we'll have the news from all of them at sportingnews.com.

Petty Enterprises has been spinning its wheels for more than a decade. Now the organization needs to make a very difficult family decision.

It's time for Petty to step aside

By Kenny Bruce

Officials with Petty Enterprises say they are committed to taking whatever steps are necessary to get the legendary team back on its feet.

If that's the case, then perhaps it's time for the organization, which has been competing in NASCAR since 1949, to hand the keys to someone other than Kyle Petty.

Kyle's grandfather, Lee, founded the team and won three championships. Richard Petty, Kyle's father, was a seven-time champion and remains the most recognizable driver stock car racing has ever produced. And Kyle, in his own way, has carved out a successful niche in the sport as both a driver and spokesperson.

But if the organization is as committed as it claims to be, the time has come for Kyle to step aside.

This spring, Petty, 48, began what was supposed to be a six-race hiatus to spend time in the television booth. He extended his break to include Indianapolis, Pocono and Michigan, but his brief

departure is doing precious little to help the No. 45 Dodge team move forward. Chad McCumbee, 23, has been given too few opportunities to become acclimated to the rigors of Cup competition. In an attempt to move into the top 35 in owner points, the team chose to rely on Terry Labonte and his past champion's provisional for the bulk of races Petty has missed instead of giving McCumbee a vote of confidence.

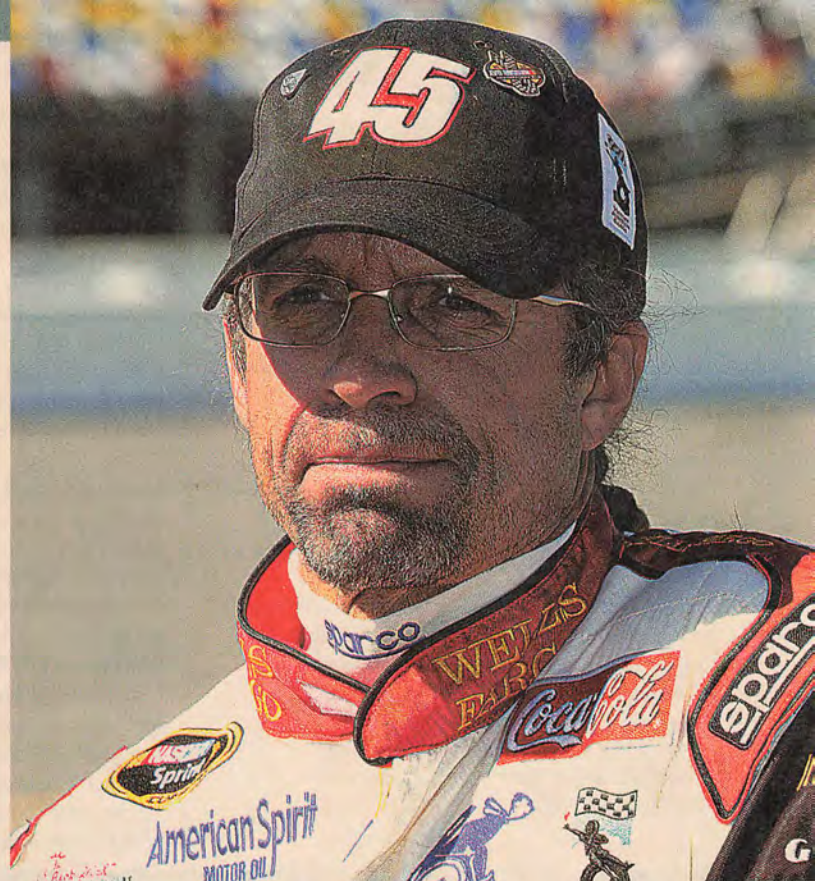
So far, the strategy—a Band-Aid solution for problems that run much deeper—hasn't worked. When Petty climbed out of the car after the Coca-Cola 600 at Lowe's Motor Speedway, the team was 41st in owner points and 303 points outside the top 35, the cutoff for a guaranteed spot in the field each week. Eight races later, after the Allstate 400

at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, the team still was 41st, 273 points out of the top 35.

The problem is that the team has been unable to build chemistry between driver and crew. And in NASCAR, chemistry is king.

If McCumbee is the future of the team, then he needs more time behind the wheel. Sitting on the sideline does little to prepare him for what lies ahead.

That Petty has managed just one top five finish



Kyle Petty has one top five finish since 1998. Maybe he should be doing more TV work and less driving.

HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

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since 1998 should speak volumes. That's one top five in 10 years, folks. Ten years. This is not to say Petty is to blame for all of the organization's problems. Petty Enterprises' second team has only 10 top fives during that same span using a variety of drivers.

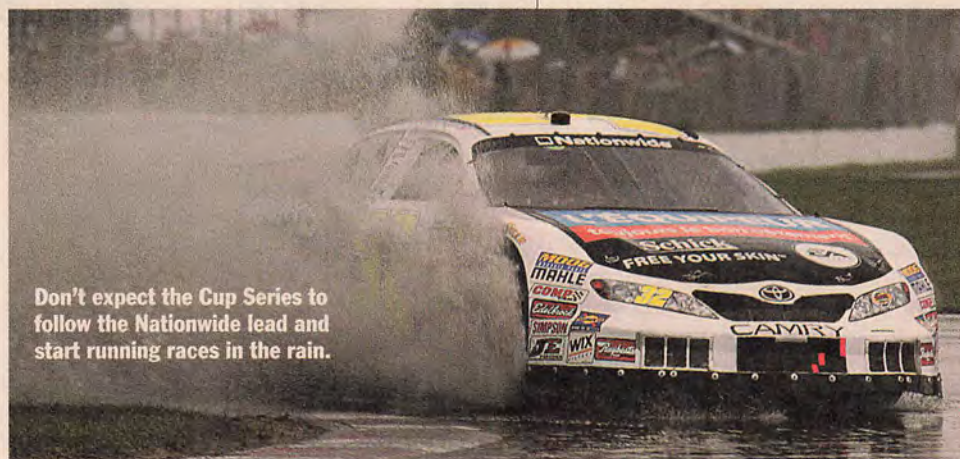
Petty has said he still has the desire and drive to compete. And I don't doubt that. But how many drivers would keep their job with such a mediocre showing for such a long period?

The answer is crystal-clear. Not one.

In his own way, Kyle is as much a part of the Petty brand as his father. But eventually, even Richard realized that it was time to step aside and leave the driving to someone else. That time has now arrived for Kyle.

If the organization truly wants to move forward and become competitive, things have to change. It's time for the folks at Petty Enterprises to bite the bullet. Before the bullet bites them. **SN**

Kenny Bruce is assistant managing editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Bruce at scenedaily.com.



Don't expect the Cup Series to follow the Nationwide lead and start running races in the rain.

INSIDE DISH

Last year, **Jeff Gordon** dominated the regular season, only to fall short in the Chase. He hopes to do to **Kyle Busch** this season what **Jimmie Johnson** did to him last year. But to make that happen, Gordon will have to win races to pick up the valuable bonus points that are handed out when the field is reset following the 26th race. Winless this year, Gordon has won at least one race every year since 1994, which gives him the longest active streak. (Actually, he has won at least two.) "If you just put us equal with everybody right now, I think we have a shot at the championship," Gordon says. "When you put us 20, 30, 70 points behind (Johnson, **Carl Edwards** and **Kyle Busch**), that's tough to overcome." ➤ Last weekend's Nationwide race in Montreal was run partially in the rain—the first NASCAR event run on grooved rain tires. The sport would only consider running in the rain at a road course, and the Cup Series won't be doing that anytime soon. There is more lee-

way in the Cup schedule anyway for a rainout because that series can run the following day. Nationwide races are usually on Saturday, so they would

have to be rescheduled for two days later (on Monday) so as not to disrupt the Cup race. NASCAR doesn't need to be worrying about whether Cup cars could run on rain tires, anyway. After the debacle at the Brickyard, NASCAR needs to talk about racing—instead of tires—for a while. ➤ That doesn't mean tire talk will end. Goodyear is contemplating a totally new tire, bigger and taller than the current model and designed to handle the new car. But it will be at least two years before it's ready. Goodyear also will hold a tire test at Indy this fall and hope to use information gleaned there to create a better tire for next year's race at the Brickyard. ➤ Memories are short in NASCAR, and all feuds can be forgotten. The new Stewart-Haas Racing alliance proves both. **Tony Stewart** and **Ryan Newman** have had occasional flare-ups, including run-ins at the All-Star race in 2004 and New Hampshire in 2006. Yet Stewart reportedly has hired Newman to be his teammate next year. Stewart's feud with **Carl Edwards**, which stemmed from a 2006 incident at Pocono, was classic. Stewart called Edwards "Eddie Haskell," and Edwards seriously considered introducing his fist to Stewart's face. "If it weren't for respect of the sport and the people watching and his team and everything, he'd be out there bleeding right now," Edwards said of Stewart in a live TV interview. His sponsor at the time: Office Depot. Stewart's sponsor next year: Office Depot.

Pit Box

NASCAR experts **Roger Kuznia** and **Reid Spencer** size up the upcoming race—and each other's analysis—every week in the Pit Box. This week: Centurion Boats at The Glen

Who will win at Watkins Glen?

1 p.m. ET Sunday, ESPN

Roger: There's no better option for road courses than four-time Watkins Glen winner Jeff Gordon. Though he didn't win at Infineon in June, the fact that he stormed back to finish third after badly missing on an early setup shows just how good he is on these tracks. He'll be hungry after spinning out last year while leading at Watkins Glen with two laps to go.

Reid: Gordon is an excellent choice, Roger. If you hadn't picked him, I probably would have. But I'm going to go with another guy who likes road courses—Kevin Harvick. He is motivated, too. Harvick is on the cusp of the Chase—he's battling with Richard Childress teammate Clint Bowyer—and he needs a strong finish to gain breathing room.

Last week: At Pocono, Kasey Kahne finished seventh for Reid and Denny Hamlin was 23rd for Roger, but Carl Edwards came away with his fourth win of the season.



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Points well-taken

How does Watkins Glen figure into making the Chase? Drivers have to get whatever they can there—because a season could be ruined on the road course, of course. *By Bill Marx*

It's that time of year, folks, when NASCAR nation digs into its Chase for the Sprint Cup toolbox and pulls out the words *wild card*.

Here's how they are used:

Bristol is a real wild card because anything can happen at a short track.

Talladega is a real wild card because you never know who will be collected in the big one.

Martinsville is a real wild card because anything can happen at a short track.

Don't believe it? The upcoming trips to Bristol, Talladega and Martinsville will be the second races at each track this season. You never hear the

words *wild card* used for the early races at those tracks.

Which brings us to this weekend's race on the road course at Watkins Glen. Welcome to the first wild card of the almost-Chase season.

Road courses are the anomaly of the NASCAR schedule. There are two in 36 races. The first one is in June at Infineon Raceway, the 16th race of the season. If a driver stumbles, he has 10 races to recover before the Chase begins. But a bad run at Watkins Glen for whatever the reason leaves a driver just four races to get back on track.

Dale Jarrett felt the sting in 2005, when 10 driv-

ers made the Chase. He came into Watkins Glen ninth in points, finished 22nd and tumbled to 12th. He missed the Chase.

Last year the Chase field expanded to 12 drivers, and Dale Earnhardt Jr. entered Watkins Glen on the bubble in 13th, seven points behind 12th-place Kurt Busch. Earnhardt's engine failed and he finished 42nd, dropping to 14th, 100 points back. He missed the Chase, losing his spot to Busch, who finished 11th at Watkins Glen.

Earnhardt remained optimistic about his Chase chances despite the disastrous finish.

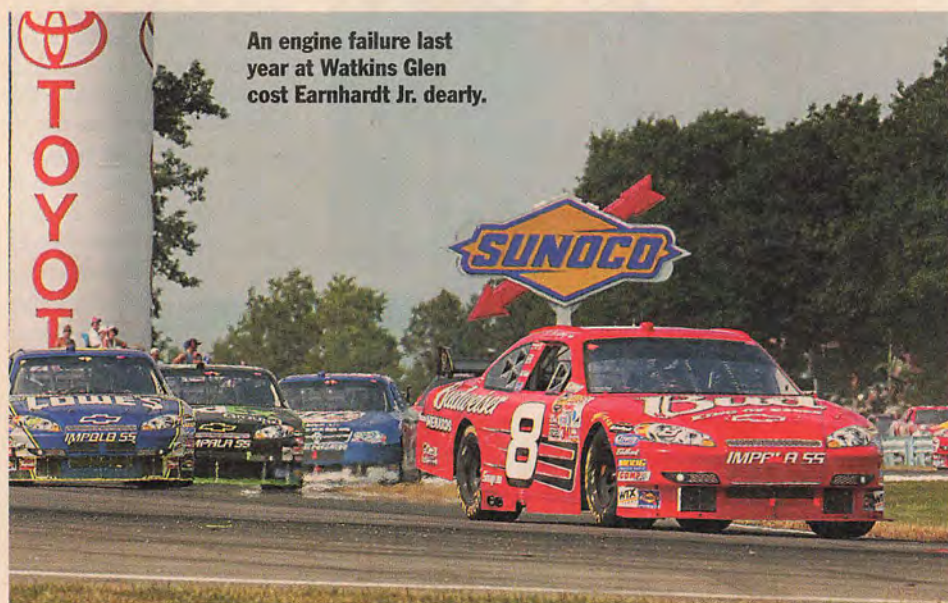
"It won't be easy, but we've done a whole lot harder stuff than that," he said after the race. "I think we have a couple races left, and there is no telling what is going to happen in those races."

But the reality was 100 points was too much to overcome. Not even finishes of 12th, fifth and fifth could put him into position to make the Chase going into the final race of the regular season.

The wild-card factor is enhanced this year because eight drivers are on the bubble—212 points separate Kasey Kahne in seventh from David Ragan in 14th.

Drivers have a choice: They can understand the importance of points-racing at Watkins Glen, or they can heed the advice of Jeff Burton, who crashed last year, finished 40th and then declared: "I am not going to get caught up in the points."

Truth is, that was easy for Burton to say. He left Watkins Glen a comfortable sixth in points. For drivers on the bubble, that sentiment is not in their Chase toolbox. **SN**



If you're counting to 100, Hamlin is in the race

Denny Hamlin made his 100th Cup Series start last Sunday at Pocono. He didn't blow away the competition in his first 100 races the way Tony Stewart, Jeff Gordon and Jimmie Johnson did, but he definitely held his own.

A look at how Hamlin's record compares with the first 100 races of the other drivers in the top 12 (except for Clint Bowyer, who has run 94 races):

'08 Rank	Driver	Wins	Top 5s	Top 10s
1.	Kyle Busch	4	24	43
2.	Dale Earnhardt Jr.	6	18	30
3.	Carl Edwards	5	27	48
4.	Jimmie Johnson	10	35	57
5.	Jeff Burton	1	13	23
6.	Jeff Gordon	12	36	53
7.	Kasey Kahne	6	27	36
8.	Greg Biffle	8	14	25
9.	Tony Stewart	12	38	63
10.	Denny Hamlin	4	26	51
11.	Kevin Harvick	4	21	39
12.	Clint Bowyer	2	13	38



The summer recruiting circuit has a little something for everyone.

A tasty trail mix

By Mike DeCourcy

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Except for the bagel I pretended to eat in order to take advantage of free wireless at Panera Bread, the gas to carry me between high school gyms and the \$6 blown on batteries for my digital recorder, I managed to make it out of Las Vegas without losing a dime during my annual trip for the summer recruiting period.

Never made it into a casino, which means there's probably no future for me as an NBA ref.

There were lots of terrific basketball players to see, though, on a July recruiting adventure that included stops in Washington, Akron, Cincinnati and, ultimately, Vegas.

There was at least one revelation, discovery, delight and disappointment while tracking the class of 2009.

Pretty much how it is every year.

The revelation: Ryan Kelly, PF, Raleigh, N.C. Kelly spent the first part of July with the United States U-18 national team, returned home for less than a day and then proceeded to tear through the Reebok Summer Championships in Las Vegas. He looks like he got lost on the way to science class, but to find a player at his size (6-9) more agile and skilled in recent years, you've got to climb all the way up the list to Kevin Durant.

Kelly showed he could shoot 3s at the U.S. trials, but in Vegas it was his finishing around the goal—in particular a baseline spin move he executed in extremely tight quarters—that dazzled coaches and scouts watching him.

Kelly's list: Notre Dame, Georgetown, Davidson, North Carolina, Wake Forest, Stanford, N.C. State, Virginia, Vanderbilt.

The discovery: Tyler Honeycutt, SF, Sylmar, Calif. So nobody is ever found on the recruiting



Franklin isn't the best shooter, but there isn't a program in the country that wouldn't love to have him on its team and in its locker room.

circuit? The college coaches are only out there baby-sitting and cheerleading? Well, then—how does one explain Honeycutt?

In a junior season at Sylmar High that Honeycutt describes as "passive," during which he "passed the ball too much" and averaged only 11.8 points, he didn't receive a single phone call or scholarship offer from a college coach. Now, having grown to 6-9 and adopted a more aggressive approach to offense with the Los Angeles-based Pump N' Run Elite, he's one of the hottest recruits along the Pacific Coast.

Honeycutt has the frame and fluid movement that catch a scout's attention immediately upon walking into a gym. He looks like a player, though recent basketball history featured several wings of his skill set and body type (Gonzaga's Micah Downs, UConn's Stanley Robinson, USC's Davon Jefferson) who lacked the aggressiveness to be consistently great.

Honeycutt's list: UCLA, USC, Arizona State.

The delight: Roger Franklin, SG, Duncanville, Texas. Although shooting guard is his position given his 6-4 height, shooting is not his strength. If it were, he'd be one of the top 20 prospects in the class of 2009.

As it is, his college suitors imagine Franklin as a high-class program player, somebody who will do everything right for four years. Long a high school power forward, Franklin still gets most of his points around the basket. His shot will need to develop but still might never be a significant weapon. He'll be coachable, though.

"They say they love my energy," Franklin says. "Throughout the course of the game, they're going to hear me scream. They know I'm going to work hard."

During a media seminar for players at the LeBron James Skills Academy, several reporters at major magazines and websites talked about how to make a good public impression. Some players dozed off but not Franklin. He never took his eyes off the speaker, never slouched in his chair. What coach wouldn't want this guy in his locker room?

Franklin's list: Arizona, Utah, Indiana, Michigan State, Oklahoma State, Oklahoma, Baylor.

The disappointment: Renardo Sidney, PF, Los Angeles. The precocious prospect who arrived at Sonny Vaccaro's ABCD Camp fresh out of junior

high hasn't grown much taller in the years since (he's 6-10), but he has gotten wider (listed at 260, but who's buying that?). Sidney is not in the kind of condition we now expect from elite basketball players.

Much like that of guard Lance Stephenson of Brooklyn, whose attitude led him to be cut from the U.S. U-18 team, Sidney's rep is a product of his boundless potential and long-standing fame. But he plays with little apparent interest or passion. Sidney is more gifted than Derrick Caracter, who has managed to play himself into oblivion during two years at Louisville, but that's scant justification for any program bringing him to campus for what likely would be one tumultuous year.

Sidney's list: Still wide-open. And good luck to the program that lands him. **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

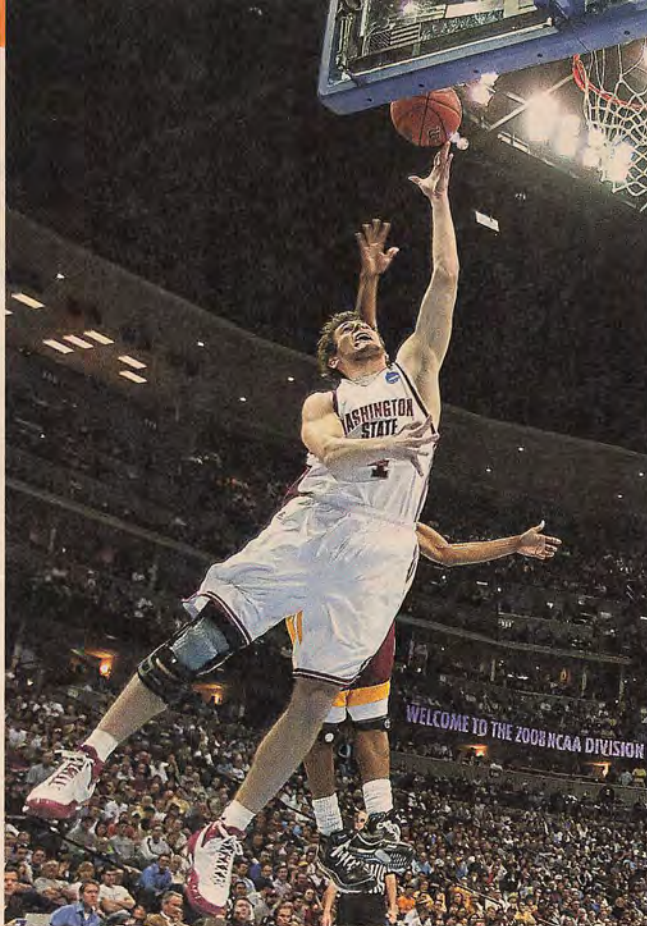
Coaches do more than recruit in the offseason. Mike DeCourcy will join a group of them at the Collegiate Business Conference and report on all the happenings at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

This year's Operation Hardwood tour doesn't feature as many big names as in the past, but organizers have rounded up some of the best guys in college basketball to visit the Persian Gulf. The roster of coaches: DePaul's Jerry Wainwright, Dayton's Brian Gregory, Manhattan's Barry Rohrsen, Texas-Pan American's Tom Schuberth, Hofstra's Tom Pecora and American's Jeff Jones. Plus, Fran Fraschilla of ESPN and Reggie Minton from the NABC are joining in. The soldiers who'll play for these coaches are in for a treat, and who could deserve it more?

With a field featuring Michigan State, Tennessee and Gonzaga in only its third year of operation, the Old Spice Classic is making a move on the Maui Invitational as the most glamorous in-season tournament. To get past the disparity between Orlando and Maui, though, somebody might have to hand out \$100 bills at the door.

Notre Dame and Texas will excel, but either would have to break new ground to win the national championship. Why? Their schedules are too doggone hard. The Longhorns play Michigan State, Wisconsin, UCLA and Villanova—and are also in the Maui tournament with Notre Dame. The average nonleague schedule rating for the past six national champions: 150th.



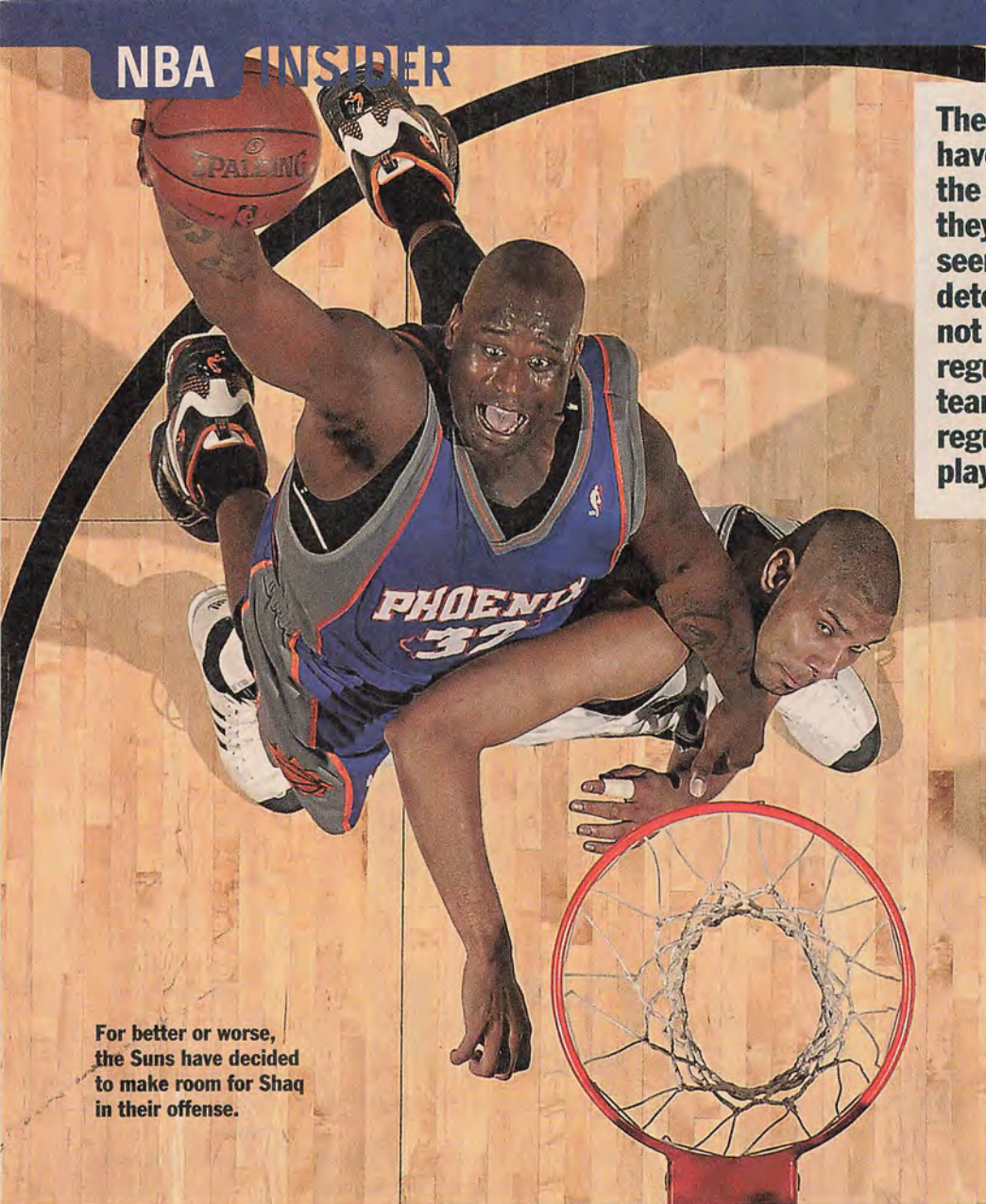
Washington State's Koprivica hopes playing for Serbia will sharpen his game.

Duke's typical approach to recruiting—pursuing a smaller group of players coach **Mike Krzyzewski** and his staff believe are good fits—is ideally designed to help the Blue Devils through their current circumstance. The team's top three coaches, including assistants **Chris Collins** and **Steve Wojciechowski**, are with the United States senior national team at the Olympics, which leaves new assistant **Nate James** and new director of operations **Chris Spatola** to handle the program on the home front. Those two were authorized to recruit on the road while the other Duke coaches were occupied with the U.S. team during training camp in Las Vegas; Collins and Wojciechowski took turns serving as the third designated recruiter before leaving for Beijing. Technology will help the Duke coaches stay in touch with the four class of 2009 prospects they're pursuing while the Olympics continue. "The globe is much smaller than it used to be," Wojciechowski says. ➤ Wisconsin was able to get far ahead of the game in the recruiting period because it already has filled its only scholarship vacancies for the 2009 and 2010 classes—with two players in each. The Badgers

INSIDE DISH

have SG **Diamond Taylor** of Bolingbrook, Ill., and SF **Mike Bruesewitz** of Mendota Heights, Minn., in their senior class. They have junior-year commitments from two in-state players, PG **Vander Blue** of Madison and C **Evan Anderson** of Eau Claire. Anderson looks like he could be former Badgers C **Brian Butch's** twin. UW coaches still checked out senior and junior prospects in case vacancies pop up, but they were able to get a big jump on looking at younger players. ➤ Purdue coach **Matt Painter** took a weekend break near the end of the July recruiting period to run a couple of practices in advance of the Boilermakers' upcoming Australian tour. Painter wants to stress cohesiveness on defense and rebounding as the focus of the trip. But SG **Keaton Grant** is not available as he recovers from surgery, and freshmen are not

allowed to go on summer trips, so the Boilermakers did not have a lot of bodies available for practice. ➤ Washington State has some significant vacancies on the perimeter with the departures of Gs **Derrick Low** and **Kyle Weaver**, but SG **Nikola Koprivica** has been preparing to take one of those spots as captain of Serbia's U-20 national team competing in the European Championships in Latvia. Koprivica says "to be captain of your national team is not a little thing." He averaged only 2.5 points in 11.2 minutes per game last season for WSU. ➤ New Bryant College coach **Tim O'Shea** was left with a nightmare schedule. In the program's first year in Division I, Bryant will play Connecticut in an early-season game and later will face Providence, Boston College, Maryland, Iowa and Rutgers in a five-game stretch. O'Shea is excited about the fact Bryant will be entering the Northeast Conference full time in 2012, with the opportunity to play games against its future league partners in the interim.



For better or worse, the Suns have decided to make room for Shaq in their offense.

Slowly, Phoenix's novelty act had lost steam. Now all the Suns want is to play defense and be like everyone else.

It's not so bad being just another team

By Sean Deveney

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

At some point in the coming months, presumably after a few sauna sessions to melt the offseason pounds off Shaquille O'Neal, the Suns will trot out the big fella and proclaim—once again, even at age 36—he can be the cure for the team's playoff ills.

It didn't work out that way in the last postseason, of course, as the Spurs beat the Suns for the fourth time in six years, this time in a five-game first-round series. But one benefit of a monster in-season trade is that if it doesn't work out, you get to hit the reset button before the next season starts.

You know the routine: The Suns will say that, with a full training camp with O'Neal ... with a

The Suns have become the one thing they once seemed so determined not to be—a regular NBA team with a regular NBA playbook.

more cohesive playbook ... with better chemistry, the whole team will improve. They'll say this because, well, what else can they do?

Ultimately, the Suns have become the one thing they once seemed so determined not to be—a regular NBA team with a regular NBA playbook. Now, they'll need to convince fans that they still can contend in the wake of a deal that cost them Shawn Marion and Marcus Banks. David Griffin, the Suns'

vice president of basketball operations, doesn't think this will be a problem.

"Not at all, really," he says. "Looking back, I think fans understood where we were. Marion didn't want to be here. We wanted to do something that could get some help for Amare (Stoudemire). Everyone understood what we were trying to accomplish with the Shaq deal. Fans understand what we're doing."

What they've done is a dramatic remake, for better or worse. For a brief period, the Suns were the NBA's chief novelty act, chucking up shots in high volume from tipoff to buzzer. But O'Neal's arrival was a prelude to ending that novelty. The thought—as trumpeted by then-coach Mike D'Antoni—behind the O'Neal trade was that the Suns could continue playing their frenetic, uptempo style, but O'Neal could be deployed during those key stretches in which Phoenix absolutely had to have an easy basket. Didn't work.

Now D'Antoni is gone, replaced by coach Terry Porter, and you can kiss those 130-124 scores goodbye, though Phoenix still figures to be a powerful offensive team. Porter is preaching defense with plans to slow the offense and better integrate O'Neal. Under D'Antoni, too often, the Suns had already hoisted a quick 3-pointer by the time Shaq had reached the offensive end of the court. So they'll do what almost every other team does: stop hoisting quick 3-pointers.

"The coaching change is going to be significant," Griffin says. "We're going to be much more defensive-minded. Schematically, it will help the offense. It makes it a lot easier to throw the ball into the post when you have the time to set up the play. We never seemed to get to that point last year."

The changes will be obvious from the first day of training camp. But the Suns' fate could be tied to more obscure factors. An understated problem last season was the team's overreliance on Grant Hill, who at 35 is not the perimeter threat needed to create space for O'Neal. And Hill struggled on defense.

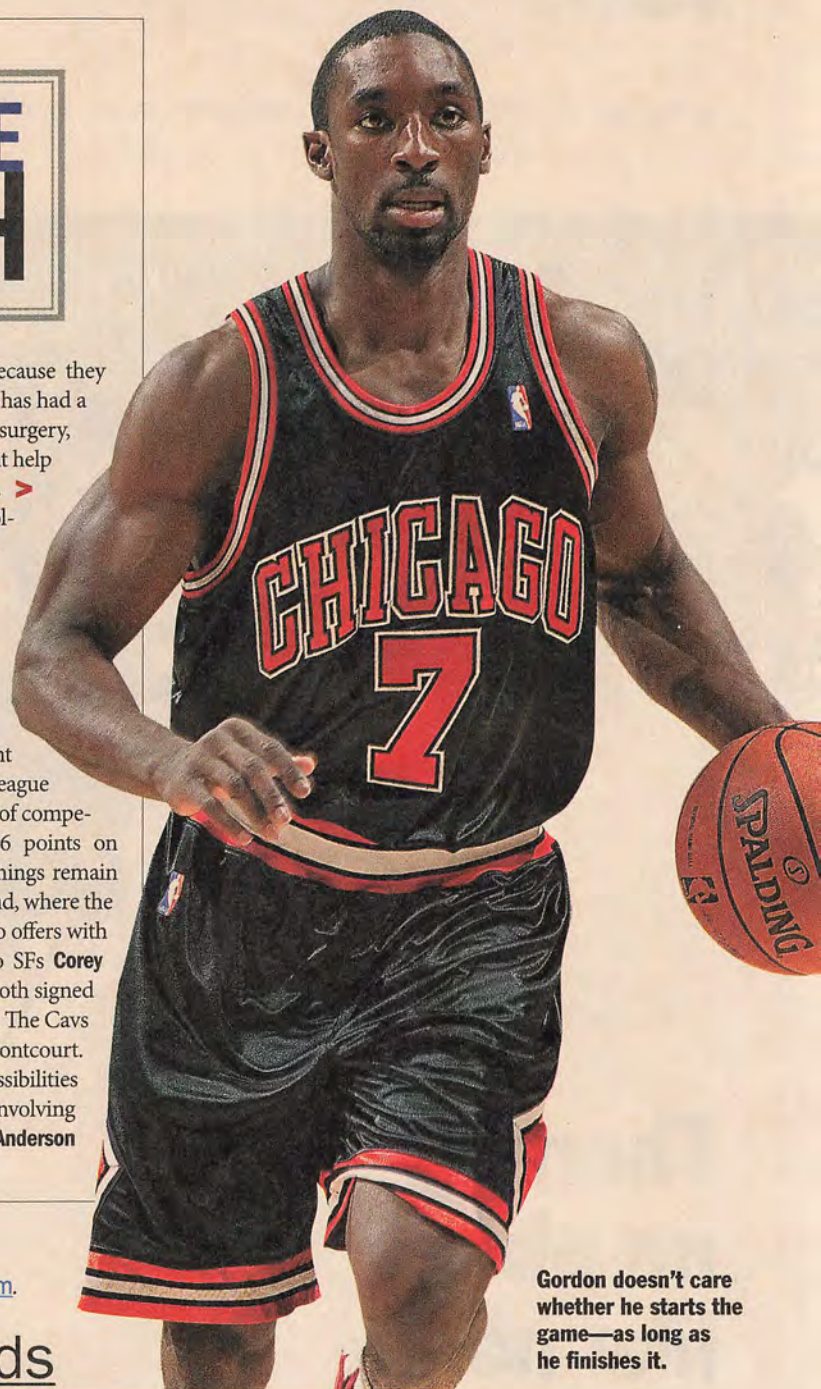
The Suns are gambling that free-agent pickup Matt Barnes can regain his outside shot. If he

The Rockets are planning to use **Ron Artest**, acquired last week from Sacramento, the way the Kings had been recently—playing him at power forward, where he is strong enough to defend the position and versatile enough to create mismatches on offense. With Artest gone, the Kings' rebuilding program is almost complete. Sacramento's goal is to collect cap space, youth and draft picks, and by getting SG **Bobby Jackson's** expiring contract, a first-round pick and SF **Donte Greene** (who averaged 22.6 points in summer league), the team achieved all three goals. With PG **Mike Bibby** dealt last season and Artest in Houston, a trade involving C **Brad Miller** will likely follow soon. ➤ Restricted free-agent G **Ben Gordon** says he has tried to maintain patience through a second summer of difficult contract negotiations with the Bulls. He says he knows Chicago has spoken with at least two teams about sign-and-trade options, but nothing has come of the discussions. No matter what happens, Gordon would like the chance to start—but it's not a deal-breaker if a new team asks him to be a sixth man. "It's important, but it's not that important," Gordon says. "I have been coming off the bench and sharing both roles pretty much throughout my whole career in Chicago. I have learned that the most important part is finishing the game, and I have been on the floor at the end of games. The decision now is more about doing the right thing for me and my family than about starting."

➤ Losing PF **Nenad Krstic** to a Russian team on a two-year contract might not be

➤ INSIDE DISH

a bad thing for the Nets because they retain his NBA rights. Krstic has had a difficult recovery from knee surgery, and two years in Russia might help him get back to 100 percent. ➤ The Timberwolves have collected some nice young talent, but there's reason to be concerned about the play of SF **Corey Brewer**, the No. 7 pick in the 2007 draft. Brewer had a miserable rookie year; he averaged 5.8 points on 37.4 percent shooting. During summer-league play, against a far lower level of competition, he averaged only 9.6 points on 37.0 percent shooting. ➤ Things remain suspiciously quiet in Cleveland, where the Cavaliers have made only two offers with their midlevel exception—to SFs **Corey Maggette** and **James Posey**. Both signed much bigger deals elsewhere. The Cavs remain logjammed in the frontcourt. Now that their free-agent possibilities have dried up, trade talks involving C **Zydrunas Ilgauskas** or F/C **Anderson Varejao** are the next step.



Gordon doesn't care whether he starts the game—as long as he finishes it.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Sean Deveney will look at the task ahead for Team USA at sportingnews.com.

does, he could replace Hill as a starter. They're also hoping their top draft pick, center Robin Lopez, and second-round point guard Goran Dragic (if he can get out of his contract in Spain) can play enough to keep O'Neal and point guard Steve Nash, 34, rested.

And maybe that's just a sign of where this team is now. The Suns are thinking defense, trying to create better offensive spacing, hoping their young reserves will hold up. These are the kinds of things all teams worry about in the offseason.

The Suns have hit the reset button and, here they are. No longer some sort of NBA freak show, they're happy being just another team. **SN**

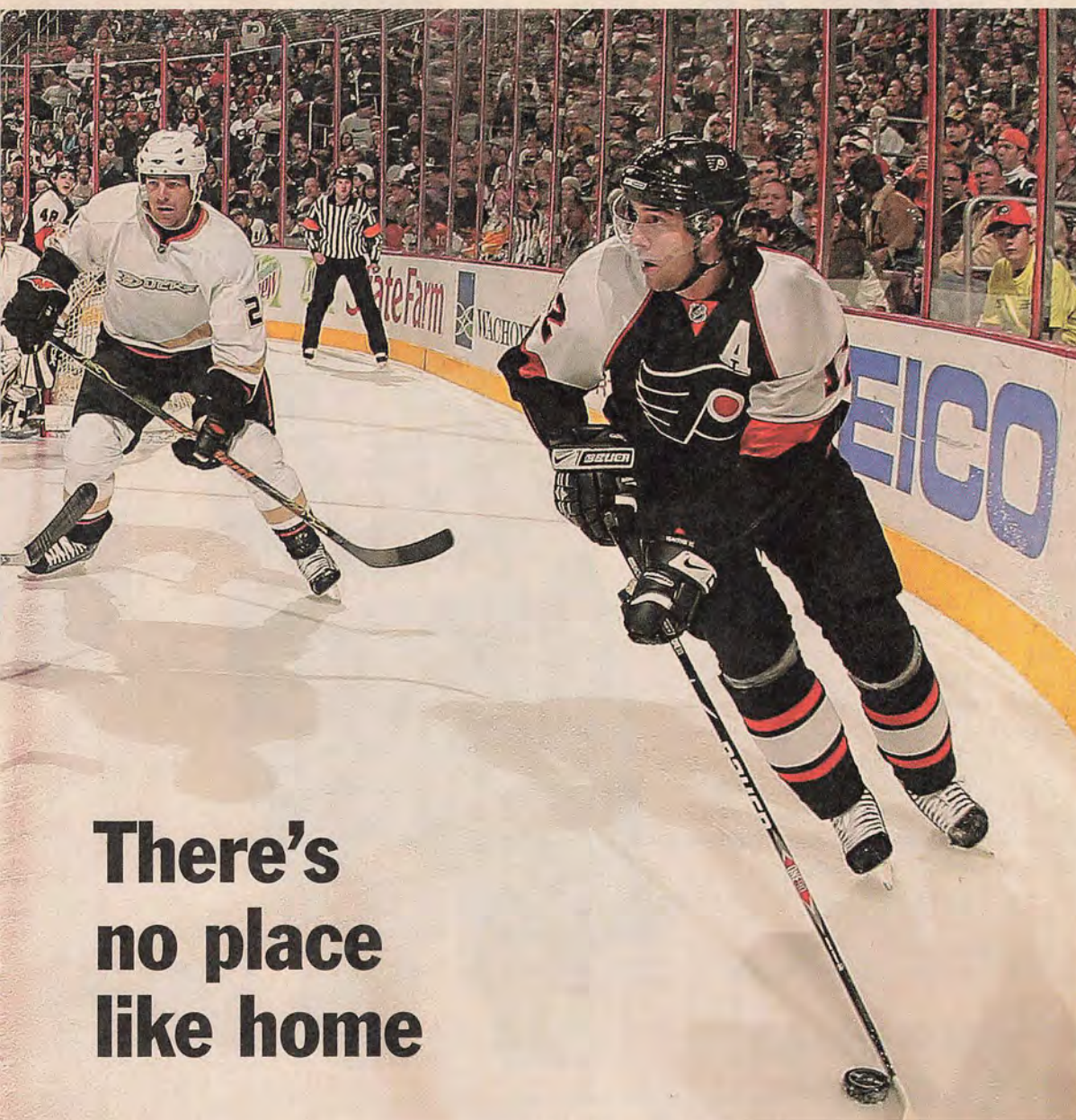
speedreads

Restricted free agency unquestionably has become a problem in the NBA. But few agents are expecting the next collective bargaining agreement to produce a change in the system. The league has, effectively, created a hard salary cap. "That's what they wanted all along," says one agent, "and I don't think the union has the willpower to fight them on it."

Kwame Brown is a good signing for the Pistons. Surrounded by veterans in a professional atmosphere, Brown could finally tap into his potential and blossom. If not, the Pistons aren't paying him much. It's a good low-risk gamble.

LeBron James pretty much summed up the dysfunction of the 2004 Olympic team when he said, "The lowlight was not playing." Hard to believe that a Hall of Fame coach like Larry Brown saw fit to keep James on the bench behind, say, Richard Jefferson and Lamar Odom.

Sometimes the best place for G.M.s and coaches to look for offseason help is in their own locker rooms.



There's no place like home

By Craig Custance

ccustance@sportingnews.com

When a player comes back from an injury, Capitals coach Bruce Boudreau explains, it's almost like adding a free agent. He is referring specifically to Capitals center Michael Nylander, who struggled through last season with a shoulder problem.

But Boudreau could be the coach or general manager in any NHL city. Almost every team has

If the Flyers went to the conference finals without Gagne, just imagine what they'll do when he's back—at 100 percent.

someone looking to rebound from an off year or debilitating injury. Five players to watch—plus selected others—with the season only two months away:

1. Simon Gagne, LW, Flyers. He played only 25 games last season while suffering from the effects of multiple concussions. He has been cleared to play and should be 100 percent when the season begins.

Entering last season, Gagne was coming off consecutive 40-plus-goal years. A return to form would provide serious punch for a team looking to build on last season's trip to the Eastern Conference finals.

"Imagine if we would have signed him as a free agent this year," Flyers general manager Paul Holmgren says.

2. Michael Nylander, C, Capitals. Nylander's name has come up in trade talks, but Boudreau is excited to see what he can do for the Caps when not hampered by a shoulder injury. Nylander, 35, scored 37 points in 40 games last season but wasn't even close to the player he had been in New York.

"He has trained very hard to get back to where he wants to be," Boudreau says. "The year before last, he was an elite player and a top free-agent get. He's a 90-point guy who was just feeling his way around."

3. Martin Havlat, RW, Blackhawks. Havlat had shoulder surgery after last season ended and expects to be 100 percent for training camp.

Amid all the high-profile moves the Blackhawks have made this summer—adding defenseman Brian Campbell, goalie Cristobal Huet and even Scotty Bowman to the front office—a healthy Havlat could be a difference-maker in the Blackhawks' effort to return to postseason play.

He played only 35 games last season after scoring 25 goals in 56 games in 2006-07.

Did we mention Havlat is in a contract year? He'll make \$6 million this season and is scheduled to be an unrestricted free agent July 1.

4. Jon Sim, LW, Islanders. The New York coaching staff liked what it saw from the gritty forward in the two games he played for the Islanders before suffering a season-ending knee injury. Coming off a 17-goal season in Atlanta, he was signed last summer to a three-year deal worth

> INSIDE DISH

\$3 million, and now he's itching to earn that money.

"I'm the only player who wants to play right now," Sim says. "I wanted to play two months ago."

With the arrival of a new coaching staff in New York, Sim sees an opportunity for a clean slate.

"It's almost like a fresh start for me. We're all in the same boat," he says. "I'm not going to be behind. My training is as good or better than last summer."

5. Slava Kozlov, LW, Thrashers. It wasn't an injury that limited Kozlov last season. He played in all 82 games but never recovered from a slow start and appeared uninterested during a lost season with the Thrashers. New coach John Anderson needs a comeback out of the 36-year-old Russian.

After scoring 28 goals and 80 points in 2006-07, Kozlov was a bust in the first year of a new three-year contract. His points total dropped nearly in half to 41, and his 17 goals were his lowest total in a season in which he played at least 47 games.

"He has to score like he did in the past or we're not going to win," Anderson says. "The proof has already been in that pudding. We're going to have to get him going."

Others to watch:

Tim Connolly, C, Sabres. Connolly, who has been bothered by concussions and other injuries, could be a surprise this season.

Justin Williams, RW, Hurricanes. "He's a good player. He'll bounce back, and he'll make a difference with this team," says Carolina G.M. Jim Rutherford. Williams missed much of last season with a knee injury.

Philippe Boucher, D, Stars. With shoulder injuries behind him, Boucher should return to 2006-07 form. **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

For all the daily news as the NHL gears up for a new season, check out Craig Custance's blog at sportingnews.com.

speedread

Scotty Bowman leaves the Stanley Cup champion Red Wings for a similar job with the Blackhawks. Isn't that a little like Superman going to work for Lex Luthor?

—Ron Smith

By the time Red Wings C **Valtteri Filppula's** new contract reaches its final season, his annual average salary of \$3 million will look just as outrageous as LW **Henrik Zetterberg's** 2008-09 salary of \$2.9 million. It's this forward thinking—and willingness to assume some long-term risk on developing players—that makes Detroit's **Ken Holland** the best general manager in the game. "(Filppula) had a real good playoff for us this year," Holland says. "Our feeling over the next five years is that he's going to continue to grow as a player. He'll grow more and be more important to us." The deal is for five years and \$15 million. Had he not signed a long-term contract, Filppula likely would have made between \$1.5 million and \$2 million next season. > Wild G.M. **Doug Risebrough** doesn't want to get into specifics concerning negotiations on a long-term deal for star RW **Marian Gaborik**. But he confirms that's the next step in his summer plan. "We've been dealing with issues as they have

come up. The only issue left is the commitment we've made with Marian," Risebrough says. Look at the interest RW **Marian Hossa** received this summer in

free agency for an idea of what Gaborik will be worth next summer. Any long-term deal will start at \$8 million per year and head north, but Risebrough is optimistic Gaborik and the Wild can get a deal done. "I think our purposes are aligned," he says. > If the Winter Olympics weren't being held in Vancouver in 2010, you probably already would have heard a league announcement that the popular Winter Classic outdoor hockey game is going to be an annual event. But the logistics of holding an outdoor game the same year as the Olympic Games could mean a 2010 Winter Classic in a different form. "We might consider using it for a special event. Maybe one year, the All-Star Game is outdoors," says NHLPA executive director **Paul Kelly**. "Those kinds of things have been talked about. We haven't ruled any of that out."

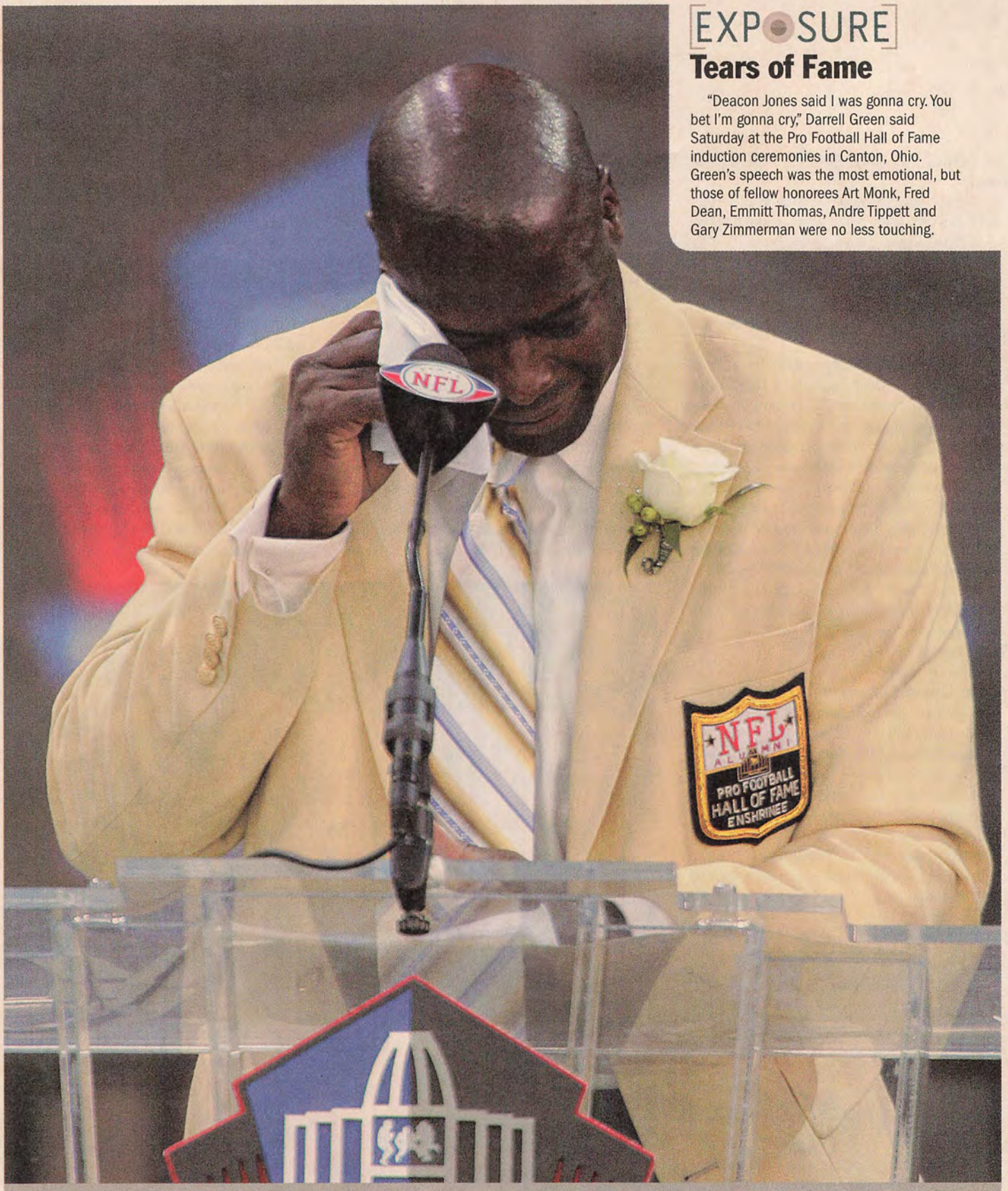


By the end of his contract, Filppula could be a real bargain for the Red Wings.


EXPOSURE

Tears of Fame

"Deacon Jones said I was gonna cry. You bet I'm gonna cry," Darrell Green said Saturday at the Pro Football Hall of Fame induction ceremonies in Canton, Ohio. Green's speech was the most emotional, but those of fellow honorees Art Monk, Fred Dean, Emmitt Thomas, Andre Tippett and Gary Zimmerman were no less touching.



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